

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト●黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

キノの旅 VIII

the Beautiful World



電撃文庫

Kino no Tabi
-the Beautiful World-
vol. VIII

by Keiichi Sigsawa

[Novel Updates](#)

Translation Group: [Untuned Translation](#)

Epub: [Trollo WN/LN EPUB](#)

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キノの旅
VIII

the Beautiful World



Frontispiece: The Country of Roads -Go West!-

"These roads are great, Kino."

"Yeah."

"They're more like streets than roads. The smoothest, widest, gentlest, and prettiest streets I've ever been on."

"Me too."

"Cheers to the amazing people who made these amazing streets."

"Yeah... Not that you can drink, Hermes."

"I'm just saying that's how great these streets are. I wish I could meet them and thank them in person."

"That would've been nice."

"I wonder why..."

"...Why did everyone in this country die? I don't know. It's not like there's anyone around to ask."

"That's true. Anyway..."

"Yeah?"

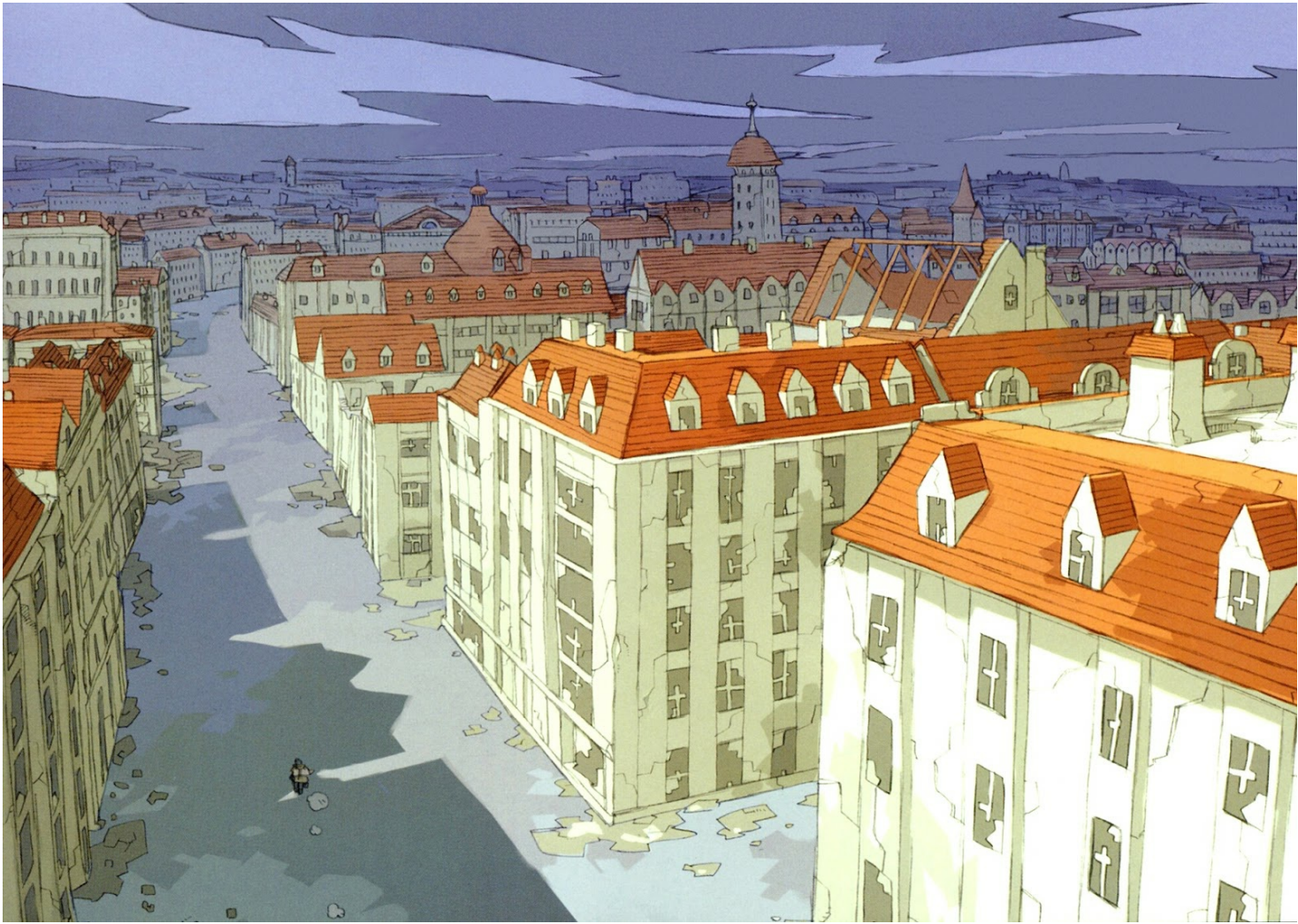
"How far does this street go? We've been going for so long I'd have expected to see the western gates soon."

"Yeah... We've been going for two whole days."

"You'll break your own rule if we don't make it out today."

"That's why I'm trying so hard."

"These roads are great, Kino."



Frontispiece: The Country Where Crime is Impossible -Black Box-

Kino and Hermes were wearing glasses.

Kino's were, naturally, on her face. Hermes' were in front of his headlight.

"Are you sure this looks okay on me, Kino?"

"You look just fine, Hermes."

"Really? It really gets in the way, though."

The gates opened before their bespectacled eyes and the country proper came into view.

A little earlier:

"Let me explain," said the immigrations officer. They were all in a little office just inside the walls—Hermes loaded with luggage, Kino in her brown coat, and the officer in his uniform. "Those glasses you're holding are a surveillance device."

Kino was indeed holding a pair of glasses, which on the surface appeared to be perfectly ordinary. With the exception of the small, pinky-sized machines fixed to the arms, near the wearer's temples.

"The left-side module with the lens contains the camera, and the right-side module contains the recording device and the battery. That camera will record your actions, Kino. It works even in the dark and even picks up sound with perfect clarity. In other words, it tracks your every move. Of course, it would be a breach of privacy if just anyone could access those records. Only—"

"Only police and judges are allowed to see them, right?"

"Precisely, Hermes. Not even you would be allowed to look at your own recordings. The police are permitted to access the records of a perpetrator provided that they have been issued a warrant. In other words, crime cannot stay hidden in this country."

“I see. So that’s why they say crime is impossible here,” Kino said.

The immigrations officer nodded firmly. He was also wearing a pair of glasses. “Precisely. Everyone here knows full well that all misdeeds will be brought to light. At one point, crime ran rampant throughout our country and murder was the leading cause of death. That was why our authorities, deeming that desperate times called for desperate measures, were compelled to develop this system. Our crime rates dropped in a matter of decades. Crimes of passion are the only instances of lawbreaking we see now, and even those are quickly discovered.”

“I see.”

“Mhm.”

“People are legally obligated to keep their glasses on at all times while active, with certain exceptions. If it is not in contact with the user’s skin for more than thirty seconds while the user’s brain is still active, it sounds a warning that is also conveyed to other glasses in the area. The exceptions I mentioned earlier are for sleeping, changing, putting on makeup, and washing. You’ll find glasses stands that act as chargers all around the country, where you may place your glasses pointing at yourself when you are partaking in one of the above actions. The camera recognizes the user and acknowledges that the user is participating in an exceptional action.”



“Your technology is incredible.”

“It’s really awesome.”

“I’m very happy to hear that,” the officer said with a laugh, and jumped to the point: in their country, Kino would be obligated to follow the law as well. She could not enter if she did not wear a pair of glasses.

Kino nodded. “I understand. I will comply with your laws.” The officer was still breathing a sigh of relief when she asked, “By the way, what about Hermes? I think it would be a good idea for him to get a pair as well.”

“A motorrad cannot move of its own accord, so he wouldn’t be obligated to wear the device.”

“Wouldn’t it be a good idea, just in case we get into a traffic accident?”

“I hadn’t thought of that! It seems you understand our system quite well, Kino. Give me a moment, and I’ll have a custom version ready for Hermes!”

Kino and Hermes stayed in the country for three days, wearing their glasses. They rested, went sightseeing, and bought and sold what they could.

It was a very safe country. They never ran across any problems during their stay, and they never caused any problems either.

“Not a single speeding car.”

Eventually, it was time for them to leave.

“What do we do with the glasses?” Kino asked the officer at the western gates.

The officer replied, “You are not obligated to wear the devices once you have left our walls. Please leave them with the guards outside the gates. You and Hermes were not involved in any illegal activity, so your records will be completely erased. Your privacy is secure.”



Kino, still in her glasses, glanced at Hermes. She thought for a moment and said, “May I keep them, actually? I’d like to introduce this technology to the next country I visit. I don’t think they’d believe such an advanced system exists unless I take it to them in person.”

“What a noble idea!” the officer exclaimed. “We’d be honored, Kino. The batteries won’t last more than two days, but the technology in the device should be a wonderful way to introduce our system to other nations.”

Kino and Hermes said goodbye to the officer and the guards, and made their way down the westward road across an overgrown plain.

“What a haul,” Kino muttered, making her way across the plains with the country’s walls disappearing behind her. Instead of her usual goggles, she was wearing her glasses. Hermes too was also wearing his custom pair.

“Could you please take this off, Kino?”

“Just a little longer, Hermes. Once we can’t see the walls anymore.”

“Ugh.”

Once the country’s ramparts had disappeared past the horizon, Kino turned off the engine and stopped Hermes.

She took out a small metal box from one of his compartments. It was just like Kino to travel light—the box was empty.

“That was a pain,” she grumbled, pulling the glasses off Hermes and her own face. Then she took out a small pin and pressed a tiny button on the recording device, then pressed it again several seconds later. Soon the glasses beeped. She did the same to the other pair.

“There. I’ve shut them off, and our records have been deleted,” Kino said brightly, wrapping up both pairs in cloth and very carefully placing them in the metal box, which she secured inside the compartment next to Hermes’ rear wheel. “They’ll sell for a small fortune at the next country. I can’t believe I managed to convince them into giving me a pair for you, too.” She grinned. Nothing was recording what she said.

“You’re evil, Kino,” Hermes said.

Completely unoffended, Kino went about dreaming of the food and new clothes she would buy with the extra income. “That also means fuel and new tires for you, Hermes.”

“Great! That was a fun country.”

Kino nodded and started the engine.



Feelings cannot be fully conveyed.

-I know what you're thinking-



Prologue: The Beginning and End of a Journey on the Beach · B -On the beach · B-

“Are you leaving now, Kino?”

“Yes. Sorry for waking you. You can go back to sleep. I was planning to leave quietly.”

“Like a fly-by-night, right?”

“Haha...the sound of Hermes’ engine would have woken me anyway.”

“Maybe. Kino’s plans are always so misty.”

“You mean ‘messy’?”

“Yeah, that.”

“I certainly can’t carry all this, so feel free to use anything I’m leaving behind. I’ve made a log of the provisions here. I’ve also taken about a third of your valuables.”

“I see. That sounds fair. Could I just ask one more thing?”

“What is it?”

“I’m little ashamed to interrogate you like this after all your help and support, but...don’t you ever think about settling in one place to live, Kino? Don’t you want a safe, secure life where you’re surrounded by loved ones, never having to worry about where to rest at night?”

“I don’t know. At the moment...well, I don’t think I’ll ever think about it.”

“No complaints here. It’s a motorrad’s jay to always be on the move.”

“‘Joy’, right?”

“Yeah, that.”

“...Isn’t it...painful?”

“It’s not all fun.”

“...”

“But it’s not all pain.”

“I see. I guess we all have our own priorities.”

“That’s right.”

“I’ll see you off over there.”

“Don’t worry about it. Lie down and get some rest.”

“All right... Then this is goodbye. Do you have anything to say before you leave...? I suppose not.”

“Goodbye, everyone.”

“Bye. Stay sharp, you stupid dog.”

“Kino. Thanks for everything.”

“What are you thanking me for?”

“I just don’t think I’ve properly expressed my gratitude.”

“Then you’re welcome. So much has happened, but we can still keep on traveling.”

“So all’s swell that ends swell.”

“Right. ... ‘All’s well that ends well’?”

“Yeah, that.”

“I see... Then I suppose this is goodbye, for now. I hope we meet again somewhere down the line.”

“I’ll see you later, then. But...”

“Yes?”

“No, never mind. I’m sure I’ll end up visiting your new homeland during my travels someday.”

“...And I hope I’ll be there for good once that time comes. I’ll be sure to welcome you with open arms.”

“Thank you.”

"It's so nice to be able to ride again."

"Yeah. By the way, Kino?"

"Yeah?"

"You ended up not really saying anything, but if you run into him again..."

"Yeah..."

"He might be shocked half to death."



Chapter 1: A Country with a History -Don't Look Back!-

A car was driving making its way down a path in the woods.

It was tiny, yellow, and battered, just about on the verge of a breakdown. It sputtered along the rough road in a trail of white exhaust.

The landscape was flat and thick with trees. The blinding sun was rising to the east, and all kinds of birds were chirping and singing on that beautiful early-summer morning.

Two people were in the car. In the driver's seat to the right was a slightly short but handsome man, and to his left was a woman with long, shiny black hair. Incidentally, the back seats were cramped, stuffed with dirty luggage and bags.

"Master," the man said, his hands firmly on the wheel as he took them through the rough terrain.

The woman replied, "What is it?"

"We're almost there," the man said, and suggested that they sell the jewels in their possession there to buy food and fuel, and exchange the rest for gold.

The woman thought for a moment. "I suppose we don't have much of a choice. But..."

"Naturally, Master. Nothing less than the highest price for our goods."

The tops of the country's walls emerged in the distance.

Though not very large, the country seemed to be a prosperous one.

Just through the gates were farms that stretched endlessly into the distance. The woman and her companion drove further into the country center, where stone buildings packed the spaces. The streets were lined with stores and street lamps, and made for a magnificent sight.

"Not bad," said the man, "It's wealthier than you'd expect from such a small

population, and the technology's reasonably advanced. The goods'll fetch a decent price."

Their car was the oldest and dirtiest on the road. A luxury vehicle passed them as if in mockery.

"I agree," said the woman, "But the heavy police presence concerns me."

The man nodded. It was unusual for a city to be so busy so early in the morning. They also spotted the occasional police officer in green military uniform. "Immigrations took some time too. Do you think they were all constabulary forces, then? The immigrations officer too?"

"Past experience tells me we can't let our guard down in a country like this," the woman replied.

The man glanced at her. "You mean because of crime?"

"No." The woman shook her head. "The people in charge of getting rid of crime. We'd better keep our heads down while we're here—more than usual, I mean."

"...Right."

The car came to a stop in front of a cheap hotel.

"I'll be ridding ourselves of the jewels, then," the man said. He wore a light brown jacket, which hid the square-barreled persuader strapped to his left side. Pulling on a backpack, he put the pouch of jewels in his pocket.

"Be as quick as possible," the woman said, "I don't want to stay any longer than necessary. We'll leave the country in the evening."

The man replied, "Of course. I'll be sure to come back by lunch, Master. Relax. Take a shower if you'd like."

Lunchtime came and went, but the man did not return to the tiny hotel room.

What had happened to the man?

He went to a jewel dealership in the busy city center and showed the shopkeeper the pouch. The shopkeeper was shocked, but he quickly smiled and went into the back room. He came back and offered the man a fabulous sum.

The man could picture the woman's satisfaction at the price and accepted the offer, walking out of the shop with a smile and extra riches in his pocket.

"You there."

Immediately, he was surrounded by four policemen. They accused him of being in possession of illegal drugs.

"What?"

One of the officers pretended to pull something out of the man's pocket—a small plastic bag, which he held up for the man to see.

"Gotcha. You're under arrest."

For a moment, the man wondered if he should draw his persuader and kill them all in two seconds.

But he quickly changed his mind.

Stripped of his persuader and his possessions, the man allowed himself to be handcuffed and stepped into the police car. He spotted one of the police officers handing money to the shopkeeper. The man swore under his breath, and for a moment, wondered if he should take down the police officers, commandeer their car, and drive it into the jewel dealership.

But he quickly changed his mind.

"And that's what happened to your boyfriend, Missy. Drug possession is a serious crime in our country. He'll be tried soon, and I guarantee you he'll get ten years or more."

"I understand. But I have one correction to make. He is not my boyfriend, simply a companion."

The woman was in a certain room inside a building at the center of the country. The large octagonal structure was surrounded by an even larger lawn.

At the center of the building was a tall, majestic tower with clocks on each of the four sides. The observation deck at the top—the highest point in the country—offered an unobstructed view of the entire area.

Across the table from the woman was a haughty middle-aged policeman in

full dress uniform, complete with medals. The blinds were half-shuttered, and showed slices of a city beautifully lit by the afternoon sun.

“Where is he now?” the woman asked. The policeman replied that he was in the prison in the basement.

The woman asked about the building. The policeman explained that this was a historic building that had once been the royal palace, before the monarchy was abolished and the building was repurposed into an all-purpose civic complex. He proudly declared that the clock tower was a historic monument protected by the government and snickered, “The police have jurisdictional authority over the tower. And the rest of the building, in fact. You’ll never see police headquarters this good anywhere else.”

‘I knew it. This is a corrupt police state,’ the woman thought, completely correct, but did not say so. Instead she said, “As you can see, we’re but a pair of travelers. Could I ask for lenience? You could use your authority to exile us.”

“Depends on your highest offer.”

The woman wrote out a number on a piece of paper, although it was impossible to tell if she really could afford such a sum.

The middle-aged policeman leaned over to count the figure.

“Not even close to enough,” he said, leaning back again. “You’d best be off now, Missy. We’ll overlook your attempt to bribe an officer of the state just this once.”

The woman did not even blink. “I suppose you’re right. He’s simply a stranger I met on my travels. I won’t shed any tears if he’s done something wrong and gotten in himself trouble with the authorities. Please excuse me.”

“You’ve made a very wise decision, Missy.”

“May I at least speak to him one last time?”

“You think I’m going to let you meet a dangerous criminal?”

“Please, could I ask you to make an exception just this once?” the woman said, and slowly pulled out a single gold coin from her pocket. She placed it on the table and covered it with the piece of paper where she had written the

number earlier.

The policeman grinned. "I supposed I could make an exception for a traveler. You have permission to speak to the accused."

The middle-aged policeman and the woman were escorted out of the room and through a series of passageways.

Along the way, the woman scanned her surroundings and noted the signs on the doors. The police officers did not notice.

They rode an elevator to the basement and reached the jail entrance. Naturally, it was guarded.

They walked down a hallway lined with cells, each one furnished with nothing but a bed and a toilet.

Only a single cell was occupied—by the slightly short but handsome man. He raised his head when he heard their footsteps. And when he spotted the woman surrounded by the police officers, he threw himself against the bars, beaming.

"Boss! You're here to get me out of here!"

But the woman responded with an icy glare. "Not likely."

"What?"

"What did I tell you about following local laws?"

"Please, Boss! It's a misunderstanding!"

"You know how I despise causing trouble for people. You're going to stay here and face trial. I have business in another country and refuse to wait for you."

"Boss..." the man whimpered, hanging his head with his hands still firmly around the bars. "I swear, I wouldn't harm a fly."

"Stay in there and think about what you've done," the woman commanded. The police officers snickered, exchanging glances.

"Boss," the man said weakly, "If you're going to leave, you can take my things. And remember the suitcase I had? The one I never let you see the inside of? You can sell it at the next country. I won't be needing it anymore in jail. But

make sure you get a good price for it—it cost me 434 gold coins.”

“All right. I’ll keep that in mind,” the woman replied.

The man hung his head again and returned to his bed. He curled up.

“Finished now?” asked the middle-aged policeman.

“Yes.”

The woman walked away from the cell and turned back to the jail entrance. There, she asked for the man’s belongings. The officer there handed her the man’s persuader and holster, his belt, backpack, and a small pouch.

“What about the jewels he had, or the money he made from them?”

“Those are considered evidence of his dealings with drug traffickers. You’re not taking them,” said the middle-aged police officer.

“I see,” the woman replied, and put the man’s things into the backpack. “Goodbye, everyone.”

And she left the building.

When she returned to her hotel room, the woman rested briefly before lowering the blinds.

Then she opened the large case that belonged to the man. Inside was a very sturdy plastic box, about as large and thick as a fancy encyclopedia. Large enough, in fact, to kill a person with.

There was a dial lock on the side.

The woman set the number to 434, and the box opened without resistance. Arranged neatly inside the cushioned interior were an assortment of devices.

“Oh? What in the world were you doing before we met? I’ll put this to good use.”

She shut the lid.

“I should do a bit of shopping before I leave,” she said to herself.

The setting sun lit the police headquarters a bright yellow.

The bell on the clock tower tolled to signal the hour.

As the middle-aged policeman leaned back in his seat, a messenger arrived with news.

“The woman has just left by car, sir. Purchased rations and travel gear, with no suspicious behavior.”

“I’m surprised. I was sure she was going to try something. Don’t let her back in. We don’t want any troublemakers around.”

“Right, sir. I also have a message from the minister. He thanks you for your services and promises compensation later, presumably after his dinner with the politicians.”

“Of course. Good work.”

“Thank you, sir. What should we do with the prisoner?”

“Exile, or maybe sentence him to twenty years of hard labor. I might roll a die on that later.”

The forest was silent.

It was a moonless night, the sky lit only by the sparkling stars.

Parked at a short distance from the country was the old yellow car the woman had driven.

“There,” the woman said, getting up from her work.

She had fastened the loose ends of her jacket and covered her head and hands completely with a wool hat and leather gloves. Everything she wore was black. On her right side was her favorite large-caliber revolver, and a backpack was slung on her back.

“This is a lovely toy.”

A short scope of some kind was secured in front of her left eye, fixed with a strap around her head.

The woman’s left eye saw the forest. From the branches shaking in the breeze to the animals scampering through the foliage, she saw everything in shades of green amplified by the machine she wore.

“A ‘night-vision scope’, eh? I could get used to this,” the woman muttered.

The man's precious case had housed the night-vision scope, a custom suppressor for his persuader, a plastic assassination knife for bypassing metal detectors, a wire for strangulation, poison capsules for inducing what appeared to be natural heart failure, and a pen that could be loaded with a poison capsule, among other tools for covert murder.

The woman crept silently through the woods and reached the walls of the country she had departed that evening. The black walls towered over her, reaching into the sky.

Checking that the coast was clear, the woman pulled out her revolver and dismantled the barrel, replacing it with another one from her backpack.

The new barrel was equipped with an unusual device. A thick metal bottle with no bottom was affixed to the barrel.

The woman cocked the hammer, pulled the loading lever, wrapped her left hand tightly around the cylinder, and pointed the bottom of the bottle at the top of the wall.

She took aim and pulled the trigger.

With a small blast, the revolver rebounded. The bottle had launched a three-pronged claw connected to a thin wire. The wire unwound itself from inside the bottle and trailed after the metal claw.

There was a quiet sound as the claw hooked itself on the wall. The woman quickly dismantled and reassembled her revolver and holstered it again.

"Perfect."

Tugging on the wire with her gloved hands, the woman checked that it was secure and began scaling the wall.

Meanwhile, inside a dark cell:

The man lay yawning in bed, mumbling to himself.

"I should get some sleep. It's probably going to take a while."

He shuffled onto his stomach and dozed off.

Although it was nearly midnight, the entertainment district was bustling with

patrons. Drunken citizens were staggering around with smiles plastered on their faces.

A lone police officer stood in a corner of the district, his back to a dark alley. He stared at the revelry in utter boredom, tapping his truncheon against his palm.

A pair of arms clad in black emerged from the alley. One covered his mouth and the other wrapped around his neck. They slipped back into the darkness without a sound.

No one noticed that a police officer had disappeared from the streets.

Even the entertainment district finally quieted down after midnight.

The streets were empty save for a few drunks who had fallen asleep on the pavement. That was when a hollow but loud noise broke the silence.

POP.

“Huh?”

One of the drunks opened his eyes. He saw plumes of smoke rising from a trash can.

“Ahh...” he mumbled, happily reaching out for warmth.

POP. POP. POP. POP. POP. POP. POP.

The same noise struck again, from different parts of the district.

“Wha...?”

The drunk’s eyes flew open. The trash cans burned, illuminating the darkened streets.

Sirens wailed as police cars and fire trucks bore down on the scene.

The commotion woke the man in the cell, who sat up and stretched with a yawn.

The sirens went on and on. Soon he heard rushed footsteps on the floor above. There was a clamor in the building.

And as though nothing was wrong, the man did his business, washed his

hands, washed his face, and did warm-up exercises.

“One, two, three, one, two, three...”

Slowly preparing himself, he finished off with a deep breath.

“All right.”

Then the man grabbed the bars and yelled at the top of his lungs, “EXCUSE ME OUT THERE! WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON? HOW IS A MAN SUPPOSED TO GET ANY SLEEP?!”

“Shut up! This has got nothing to do with you!” the officer on guard duty replied from the entrance.

“It almost sounds like there’s a riot outside,” the man remarked loudly.

“I said, shut up! I’m asking about it now!”

“I see! Thank you very much, then, and please do let me know when you get word!”

“You little—argh!”

“Is something the matter?”

The guard said nothing.

But another police officer came down the hall and stopped before the man’s cell.

“I knew you’d come for me, Master. Terribly sorry for letting my guard down today.”

“I do wish my apprentice would be a bit more careful.”

It was the woman, wearing a police uniform. She was dressed impeccably with her long hair tied and hidden under her cap. She could even pass for a slender man at first glance.

Quickly unlocking the cell, the woman tossed the man her backpack. “Your persuader and uniform are inside. Get changed.”

The man received the backpack and did as she ordered. “Were my toys helpful at all?”

“Quite. If you’re done changing, let’s get out of here.”

“What’s the plan, then?” the man asked, shoving his own clothes into the backpack.

“We’ll be staying in the building.”

“I was expecting a quick getaway.”

“Not at this stage, no. They’ve locked down the gates and the police are on full alert. We couldn’t force our way through this one. They’ll be here soon too.”

“Then what do we do?” asked the man.

“What would you do?” the woman asked back.

The man looked more serious than usual. “Hmm... If it were up to me, I would hide on the rooftops or in the sewers for three days or so. Tire them out, you know? That’s when I would try to sneak out or force my way through.”

“Not bad, but not good enough.”

“Damn,” the man groaned.

The woman grinned. “Three days is a good time, I think. But not for hiding.”

“Then?”

“We make a scene. We’ll start with the armory and pantry on the third floor. I hope you’ve gotten lots of rest today in your cell, because today we’re going all-out. We have to stay in practice, you know. And I think the view from up high will do us a lot of good.”

“Ah!” the man gasped, and put on an equally devilish grin.

*

“And then what happened, Kino?” asked the motorrad.

The motorrad was fully laden with travel gear and luggage. It was quietly making its way down a solitary road in a forest glowing a bright autumn red.

“Well...” said Kino, the rider of the motorrad. She wore a pair of goggles, a cap with ear flaps, and a long brown coat, the flaps of which were securely wrapped

around her thighs.

The sky was spotless, the sun hanging in the east to signify that it was still morning.

Kino continued to ride slowly as she answered the motorrad's question. "Master had set up bombs and incendiary devices on police cars and power plants too. The police force was in a panic. So she and her apprentice just waltzed through the empty headquarters. No one suspected a thing. They started with persuaders—they knocked out the person in charge of the armory when he came rushing in, and loaded a cart with sniper rifles, small rapid-fire persuaders, ammunition, and explosives."

"That sounds scary. It's like a two-man armistice."

"Yeah," Kino replied.

Hermes the motorrad went quiet when Kino failed to correct him, but he eventually recovered and asked, "So what did Master do after that?"

"They went to the pantry to load another cart with rations and water. This time they clearly looked suspicious with their weapons, so they knocked out a couple of officers nearby."

"And? And?"

"Then they spread rumors saying the building was rigged with bombs too. They pulled alarms, set a few small fires, and threw smoke canisters to clear out the building. Then they took the elevator at the center of the building up to the top, with their carts.

"So they didn't try to run? I was sure you were going to say they escaped with the other people in the confusion."

"The opposite. Master and her apprentice went up to the top of the clock tower. The highest point in the country. They had all the things they needed, so they cut the elevator cable so it fell all the way down the shaft into the basement."

"Bam."

"That was just about when the sun rose. The police had been on standby

outside because of the alarms, or up all night keeping order, and they were as tired as they could be. As soon as they came back to the building...”

“Bang?”

“Exactly. Master and her apprentice sniped them all from the top of the tower. Even the people in the cars—they shot the tires first to force the people outside. The tower had no obstructions and the people were all out in the open in the plaza, so it must’ve been a piece of cake. It would be harder to miss from that position,” Kino explained.

“Scary,” Hermes said, and asked, “So they killed them all?”

Kino shook her head.

“No. That’s the amazing thing about Master.”

“What did she do?”

“She was doing it on purpose. She always avoided the head or chest, only ever shooting people in the legs. Thigh wounds can be lethal because of the arteries, so she only sniped them in the knees or shins, which wouldn’t kill them.”

“Then she’d kill the people who rushed in to help, right? Classic sniper tactic.”

“Nope.”

“Huh?”

“They didn’t shoot anyone who tried to crawl away, or the people who came to rescue them.”

“What? Why not?”

“I asked her the same thing. She let me think about it, but I couldn’t figure it out until she told me.”

“I give up too, Kino. Tell me what happened.”

“All right. It has to do with the reason they went up the clock tower instead of escaping. Master knew that the two of them couldn’t overpower the police and force their way through the gates.”

“Yeah. The police would’ve been desperate, and there would have been a lot

of people around too.”

“So they decided to wait it out until the police and the people opened the gates for them and asked them to leave.”

“I get it! So that’s why they stuck around,” Hermes said cheerfully.

Kino nodded. “Yeah. If they’re shooting down anyone who approaches the building, the building becomes unusable. The people who have business there every day would get impatient with the police, pressuring them to resolve the situation. But...”

“One step into the plaza, and bang.”

“Exactly. And injuries make things more complicated than deaths. If one of their own were killed, the rest of the police would be outraged and determined to avenge their friend. But instead, they saw their friends just writhing in pain with bullet holes through their legs, which scared them more than anything. For people who fight for a living, pain is scarier than a quick death. It was a huge blow to morale.”

“I get it.”

“Granted, the police did what they could. They tried attacking from both fronts and even tried deploying armored cars.”

“But they didn’t make it?”

“No. Master was enthusiastic about the situation, but her apprentice—the man who was arrested—she said that he was on fire. He was practically threading needles with his shots, taking down every single member of the advance guard. Ambulances came and went, and once things calmed down around noon, Master and her apprentice used the police’s supplies and wrote a letter, and dropped the envelope to the ground.”

“What did they say? ‘Let us leave if you don’t want anyone else to get hurt’?”

“Nothing that upfront. Apparently it went kind of like this:”

‘To the police force of this country, who work tirelessly to serve their people:

‘We extend to you our humblest greetings on this most exquisite summer day. We villains write to you today to inform you that we have chosen this clock

tower to be our final resting place. Our intent is to defend this tower to our dying breath, fighting until our bullets are spent and our persuaders broken. We ask your cooperation in this most delicate matter.

‘P.S. The tower staircase has been equipped with a veritable mountain of explosives. Please refrain from using the staircase if you wish to protect your historic monument.’

The forest was filled with nothing but the sound of Hermes’ engine.

Finally, he said, “Scary.”

“Yeah,” Kino agreed. “I don’t know what must have gone through the police’s minds, but they probably regretted not letting Master and her apprentice go.”

“Scary.”

“Yeah,” Kino agreed. “After that, the media swarmed the area and soon the whole country knew what was happening. They even broadcast the situation live on radio.”

“That wasn’t a smart move.”

“No, it wasn’t. Master said so too. It was really helpful for her because the broadcasts told her exactly what the police was planning. A couple of teams tried to rush them at night, but her apprentice saw them through the night-vision scope on his sniper rifle and chased them away. They took shifts eating and sleeping and made themselves home in the tower.”

“For how long?” asked Hermes.

“Three days and three nights,” Kino replied. “This is how it went...”

“Ahem! Do you hear me? There is nowhere to run, you ruffians! I swear, you’ll have your wish! That tower will be your grave! And if you don’t die there, we’ll have you dragged through the streets and hang you on the gallows! Prepare yourselves!”

BANG.

“You are surrounded! Surrender now and we will let you live!”

BANG.

“Do you mean to make demands? We are willing to listen to reason!”

BANG.

“We are open to negotiations. We can make you an offer you won’t want to refuse.”

BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG.

“Er...I believe a temporary ceasefire may be in order if you would like to make any demands. What do you say?”

RATATATATATATATAT.

“Pardon us, Travelers. If you would like to leave the country, you are free to do so immediately.”

BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG.

“Please, we ask that you let bygones be bygones and leave our country.”

BANG. BANG.

“We beg of you...please, that’s enough...”

BANG. RATATATATATATATAT. BOOM. BANG.

“Please...no more...”

“If you insist, I suppose we could forget dying here and leave your country in peace.”

“R-really?”

“Depends on your highest offer.”

“...”

“How much will it be?”

“...Er...let me write it out here for you. Would this be enough?”

BANG.

“P-please! I can offer more!”

“And that’s what happened.”

“Talk about merciless.”

“The police realized that it would be easier for the country to just ‘exile’ the travelers rather than let the situation play out and get even more people injured. Master and her apprentice extorted their government and took their Minister of Police Services hostage when he came to give them the money. They took a police car to the gates.”

“All’s well that ends well. That was one heck of a story, Kino. ...I see it over there.”

Kino and Hermes continued to make their way through the woods. The tops of the country’s walls emerged in the distance.

“We’re here,” said Kino, “Remember, while we’re in that country, Cannon is just a persuader we happened to find at a flea market. And Master is a complete stranger.”

“Right.”

“But I do want to know what they say about her now.”

“It must’ve made history.”

“If Master wasn’t making things up or exaggerating.”

“I want to say it sounds like an exaggeration...”

“Yeah.”

“But knowing her, it was all true.”

“Yeah...”

Kino gave the road behind them a quick glance. Fallen leaves were dancing in the breeze.

“Relax, Kino. She’s not here,” Hermes said, “So eyes on the road, please.”

They entered the country. It was around noon.

Kino and Hermes stood in front of the octagonal building with the clock tower. More accurately, they stood on the sidewalk, across the street from the building. A large lawn surrounded the structure, and people were enjoying their lunches on the grass. Police officers were among them.

“It’s nice that they preserved their historic building,” said Hermes.

Kino nodded. "Yeah."

"It's an octagon. No mistaking it."

"And there's a clock tower, too," Kino said, starting Hermes. They began to ride parallel to the building.

"Slow down a second, Kino."

"Huh?"

Kino loosened her grip on the gas lever. Hermes pointed out a monument by the entrance, so she headed in that direction.

Once they were at the monument, Kino shut off Hermes' engine, propped him up on his stand, and examined the stone plaque on the grass.

"Move out of the way, Kino. I can't see. What does it say?"

"It's too small to make out. It doesn't look like it's for commemorating the construction of the building," Kino mumbled.

"Let me explain!"

"Whoa!" Hermes cried. Kino turned.

A bald, elderly man with a cane was standing there, with a little girl about four or five years of age who might have been his granddaughter or even his great-granddaughter.

"Sorry for scaring you," he said. "That monument is a tribute to the two heroes who saved our country."

"Heroes?" Hermes repeated.

Kino took off her hat and properly greeted the old man and the little girl. "Thank you for the offer. We would very much like to know the history behind your country."

The old man smiled. "You're very welcome. Let me explain, then. When I was still a young man, this country was incredibly corrupt."

"Oh? And? And?"

"The police, the politicians, they were all in cahoots. Breaking the rules and

leaving society to rot from the inside out. That was when a pair of righteous travelers came to our country and took a stand against the injustice.”

“And? And?” Hermes urged, excited to listen to more.

“With our hopes and expectations on their shoulders, the travelers came alone to this building—our center of government—to lay bare the depths of the corruption in this country.”

“Wow!”

“Such brave, unflinching heroes. They stood their ground for four days, refusing to surrender. Moved by their passion, our politicians and police officials reflected on their past behavior and set aside their old ways. We went on to become a great and prosperous country. We couldn’t ask for a happier ending.”

“Grandpa, that’s what you always say at the end!” the little girl chirped, hopping around and pulling the old man towards her.

The old man chuckled. “Now, now, Sweetheart. You’re going to topple me right over!”

“I understand now,” said Kino. “So the monument is a memorial of that incident.”

“Yes. It’s in all our history textbooks now, the story of the righteous travelers. The little spitfire here’s going to learn, too, once she starts school.”

Kino thanked the old man and asked, “By the way, may I ask what happened to your leg? I’ve noticed that many elderly people here—especially the men—are using canes.”

The old man stiffened for about five seconds. The little girl gave him a quizzical look.

“Y-you see! It’s just a common congenital problem here. Yes! Great business for the canemakers in our country!” he stammered, face frozen in panic. He gave one last hearty laugh and wobbled away with the little girl.

“What now, Hermes?” asked Kino. “Want to read what the monument says?”

“No,” Hermes replied immediately.

Kino put on her cap, climbed atop Hermes, and started the engine.

They set off with the building at their backs, whispering so no one could hear.

“So which one do you think is true, Kino?”

“Is that even a question, Hermes?”

“No. But this really is an optimistic country. And that’s a good thing.”

Kino smiled. “Yeah. Maybe it is.”

“What if Master decided to come back here?” Hermes wondered without much thought.

Kino gave the road behind them a quick glance. There stood the octagonal building and the clock tower.

“Relax, Kino. She’s not here,” Hermes said, “So eyes on the road, please.”



Chapter 2: A Story of Love -Dinner Party-

A lone road ran along the gentle slope. It was a barren world of brown dirt and bark. Winter was coming to the mountain.

Shining brightly to the east was the sun, and in the backdrop a beautiful blue sky that clashed with the sepia world. The gusts of wind, however, were anything but pleasant.

The road was parallel to the climb, paved with dirt that had dried out when the fallen leaves had been blown away. It was just wide enough for a single car.

A motorrad was moving down the road.

It was laden with travel gear and had compartments hanging from either side of its rear wheel. The motorrad went westward, leaving a trail of dust in its wake.

The rider wore a brown coat, the edges wrapped securely around her thighs. She wore a cap with ear flaps and a peeling pair of silver-rimmed goggles over her eyes.

She slowed at the turn and banked along the path, and accelerated when the road straightened again. Past one mountain was yet another.

The rider sighed. She was exhausted.

“What’s wrong, Kino?” asked the motorrad.

Kino softly replied, “I’m hungry.”

“Then take a break. I don’t want you to faint and fall.”

Kino was unaffected. “I know, I know. Riding is a sport, blah blah blah, even sitting in the seat and holding the lever is blah blah blah. You don’t have to tell me again, Hermes.”

“Oh, so you’re just doing this out of spite,” Hermes groaned.

“It’s all because the last country we tried to visit was gone,” Kino complained,

making a turn. “I was supposed to relax and have some good food for once.”

“Too bad for you, Kino. It probably happened pretty recently, but the place was empty. No food, just a bunch of skeletons.”

“It was good for you, though,” Kino remarked, “I scavenged a lot of fuel from the abandoned cars. It’s too bad I had to put up with the stink.”

“Thanks, Kino.”

“You’re welcome. Anyway, I’ve been keeping an eye out for a while, but even the forest here’s completely empty.”

“You’re gonna hunt something? But I don’t even see a squirrel, let alone any deer.”

Kino sighed. They continued on their way in silence.

It was a little before noon. They climbed a gentle slope for the first time in a while, and reached the top to see a gaping basin before them.

And people.

“What’s that, Kino?”

“I’m not sure.”

As they slowly made their way into the basin, the forest disappeared and gave way to a desolate wasteland.

Filling the center of the basin was a large group of people, hundreds of them along with their tents.

Hermes said, “They don’t look like they’re here for a party.”

“They must be refugees,” Kino replied. Hermes agreed.

The people filling the basin center looked almost like a dark carpet over the ground. Kino and Hermes could barely see the earth under the people’s feet. There was a thin brown line bisecting the dark mass of people; the road leading across the basin. Beyond was a large, gaping hole.

Kino and Hermes continued down the slope.

The people in the basin were in a terrible state.

Their ragged clothes exposed them to the chill, and many of them were emaciated—sunken cheeks and limbs whittled down to sticks. The eyes in their sockets looked eerily large against their dirtied faces. Some sat listlessly on the ground and others slept, while others simply lay still and did nothing but breathe. The tattered tents dotting the basin center were packed with people.

Kino stopped Hermes before she reached the mass.

“This is unbelievable. How many people do you think’re here?”

“I’m not sure. Say, do you see those tents on the left? They look a little different from the rest.”

To their right, on the southern slope of the basin, was another group of tents and people around them.

“They’re in uniform,” Hermes noted, “Probably military. I see someone with a persuader too. What do you want to do, Kino?”

“If we want to talk,” Kino said, “We’ll be better off talking to people who can talk sense.”

Kino unwrapped her coat and started Hermes. The edges of her coat flapping, Kino slowly approached the people at the center.

Countless sets of sunken eyes watched and the people at the center of the group rose to their feet. Most were grown men armed with clubs and sticks.

The men walked onto the road and stood in Kino’s way, glaring at the oncoming motorrad.

“They’re going to attack,” Hermes said. “They probably want you for dinner, Kino.”

“I’d rather avoid that,” Kino replied indifferently.

“So two or three shots, then?”

“Like I said, I’m hungry. Enough to eat a horse.”

“Coming from you, that doesn’t sound like an exacerbation.”

Several seconds passed in silence. Kino and Hermes continued approaching the men and the mass of people ahead.

Kino finally said, “You mean ‘exaggeration’?”

“Yeah, that,” Hermes replied. “You must be really hungry if it took you that long to correct me.”

“Excuse me, please let us pass,” Kino said. She stopped Hermes in front of the leering men on the road, but did not shut off the engine or step off.

The men said nothing. They simply stared with ghoulish eyes.

“Excuse us!” Hermes said, “Please let us through if you don’t want to get hurt. Kino gets really bad road rage.”

Kino muttered a word of complaint.

That was when one of the men said in a dying voice, “...anything.”

“Pardon me?”

“Give us food...give us something, anything to eat...we’re all starving.”

Kino replied immediately. “I am too.” She reached for her right side, and pulled out a hand persuader—Cannon, the large-caliber revolver.

The men sighed and said nothing more.

A gunshot broke the air.

The shot had come from the mass of people. Then men turned and helplessly made way on the road. Soon a four-wheel-drive vehicle made its way towards Kino and Hermes, barreling fast enough to run people down. It was occupied by four uniformed men. They fired off multiple warning shots into the air.

Kino holstered Cannon, and the vehicle stopped in front of her. One soldier told her to follow the vehicle until they left the road. Kino gestured in agreement, and the vehicle did a U-turn.

The vehicle with the armed passengers departed down the road still lined with refugees. Kino and Hermes followed. Hundreds of sets of eyes watched them depart.

About halfway through the mass of people, they came across a southward road. The vehicle turned, and Kino followed. They continued past yet more refugees until the road began to climb up a gentle incline. Ahead was a

compound of several tents, encircled by a sturdy log fence.

There was a barrier gate on the road, guarded by several armed guards. The red-and-white bar rose for the vehicle and fell again as soon as Kino passed through.

The compound was a military camp, with the green tents lined to perfection. The soldiers stationed there were either standing watch or resting. Fuel canisters sat next to the cars and trucks.

Kino stopped Hermes and took off her goggles. The man in the passenger seat of the four-wheel-drive vehicle disembarked and went to Kino as the rest of the camp watched. Kino gave a light nod.

“That was very close, Traveler. If you’d so much as handed them a piece of candy, they would have swarmed you until there was nothing left.”

“Of course.”

“We are only permitted to use force in the event that we, our comrades, or our supplies are under threat—which means we cannot assist you in case of an emergency.”

“I see,” Kino said, “Thank you for your help.”

The man replied nonchalantly, “Not at all, Traveler. We simply happened to find you during a routine patrol by pure coincidence. You’re very fortunate.”

He led Kino and Hermes to one of the tents. It stood at a slight distance from the others, and had no walls.

Several older people, likely high-ranking officers, stood around a table under the tent.

“Sir! This is the traveler we happened to find. By pure coincidence, of course.”

“Excellent work, Sergeant. You may take your leave.”

The sergeant saluted and left the tent. Kino introduced herself and Hermes.

One of the men carried himself with an air of complete dominance, his grand mustache emphasizing his authority. He introduced himself as a general and the commander of the camp, explaining that they were from the military of a

neighboring country.

Hermes jumped straight to the point. “Did something happen?” From the camp they could clearly see the entire basin and the refugees in the camp.

“Ah, let me explain,” the general said, fiddling with his mustache. He turned to the refugees. “This area is home to many small countries. The people you see there were originally from a country just east of this area.”

“We passed through it yesterday. It was deserted. There was nothing left to live on.”

“Then I suppose I don’t need to explain much more. We had a string of unusually cold summers these past few years. Crops failed and harvests plummeted. The country you passed happened to be ruled by incompetents who let their nation collapse. The powerful people fled as far as they could, of course, but most of its citizens are now starving refugees who settled here in this basin.”

“I see,” said Hermes, “Are the countries in the area going to help?”

The general replied, “If only we could. But we and the other nations were also hit hard by the poor harvests. We simply don’t have the resources to spare.”

“I understand.”

“That is why the countries in the area agreed to isolate the refugees here in this basin to prevent them from spilling over into our lands. We take turns sending in our forces to keep an eye on them.”

Kino asked, “What will happen to these people?”

“What else?” said the general, “People are succumbing to hunger and disease every day. They’ll be dying by the dozens soon, and by spring this place will be empty. Until then, we will continue to throw corpses into the pit and scatter coal over them.”

“I see,” said Kino. A faint but cold breeze ruffled Kino’s coat and blew into the basin.

“In any case,” said the general, a mischievous look on his face, “It’s almost time for lunch. Care to join us, Kino?”

“Thank you. It’s all so delicious.”

Kino and the officers sat around a long table set up under a tent without walls. Kino had taken off her coat and was wearing a napkin on her neck. The table was set with a fantastic lunch for the general and the officers.

The main dish was a thick slice of ham steak seasoned with raspberry sauce and large boiled sausages and shredded cabbages, with piping-hot carrots and broccoli served with fresh mayonnaise and kommisbrot with bottled unsalted butter. They were also served apples, pears, and grapes, and hot tea and honey.

When the general urged her to not stand on ceremony, Kino did exactly as she was told and dug in to her heart’s content. Hermes simply watched in awe.

“I’m glad to see you like it,” the general finally said, forcing himself to smile once he had recovered from the shock of seeing Kino’s enthusiasm.

The table offered a perfect view of the hopeless, starving refugees in the basin. The smell of food wafted from the tent to the people below.

Kino ate as quickly as she could without forgetting her manners. “I like this rye bread, General. It’s the best I’ve ever had.”

“I’m very glad to hear that. I’ll make sure to let the cooks know,” the general said, watching Kino take a very large cut of ham steak and bring it to her mouth. “By the way, I had a question for you. Kino, what do you feel is the most important emotion for a traveler to hold onto? Is it callousness, do you think?”

Kino swallowed. “No.”

“Oh?”

“It’s self-love. I was taught that a traveler was to value love for oneself above all else, in any situation. This ham is delicious, too.”

“If you’ll excuse us, Kino. Do take your time and get some rest.”

“Thank you.”

One by one, the mustached general and the officers left the table. Most of them had not finished their food.

Finally, only Kino and one officer were left.

The officer was a rotund man with a round face. His uniform almost looked too tight for him.

Slowly but surely, he ate every scrap of food on his plate.

“Hm?” He looked up, noticing Kino’s gaze. “I’m trying to make sure I don’t leave any.”

Kino finished her food and watched the officer, wiping her mouth on her napkin. Finally, the man stabbed his fork into a piece of broccoli and brought it to his mouth. His plate was empty.

“I know this isn’t actually helping anyone,” he said, slowly drinking his tea. “But I see those starving people over there, dying of hunger, and I felt like if I couldn’t help them, the least I could do was finish all the food that came to me.”

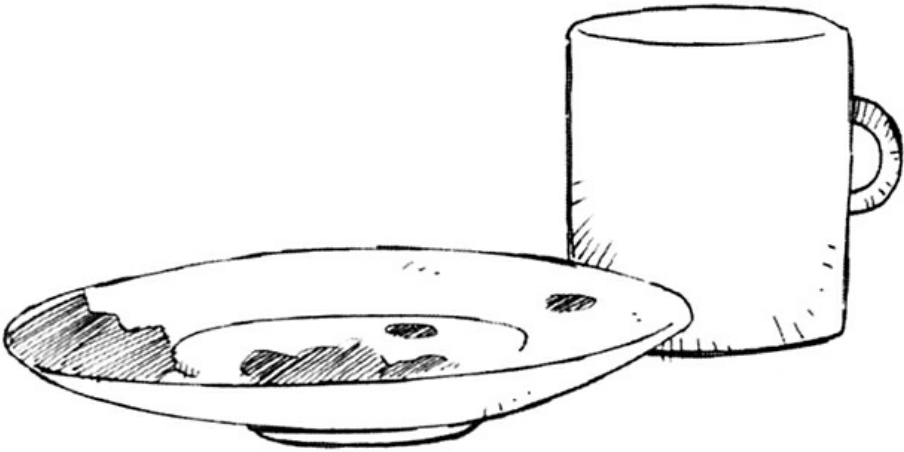
“I see,” Kino said, showing neither approval nor disapproval.

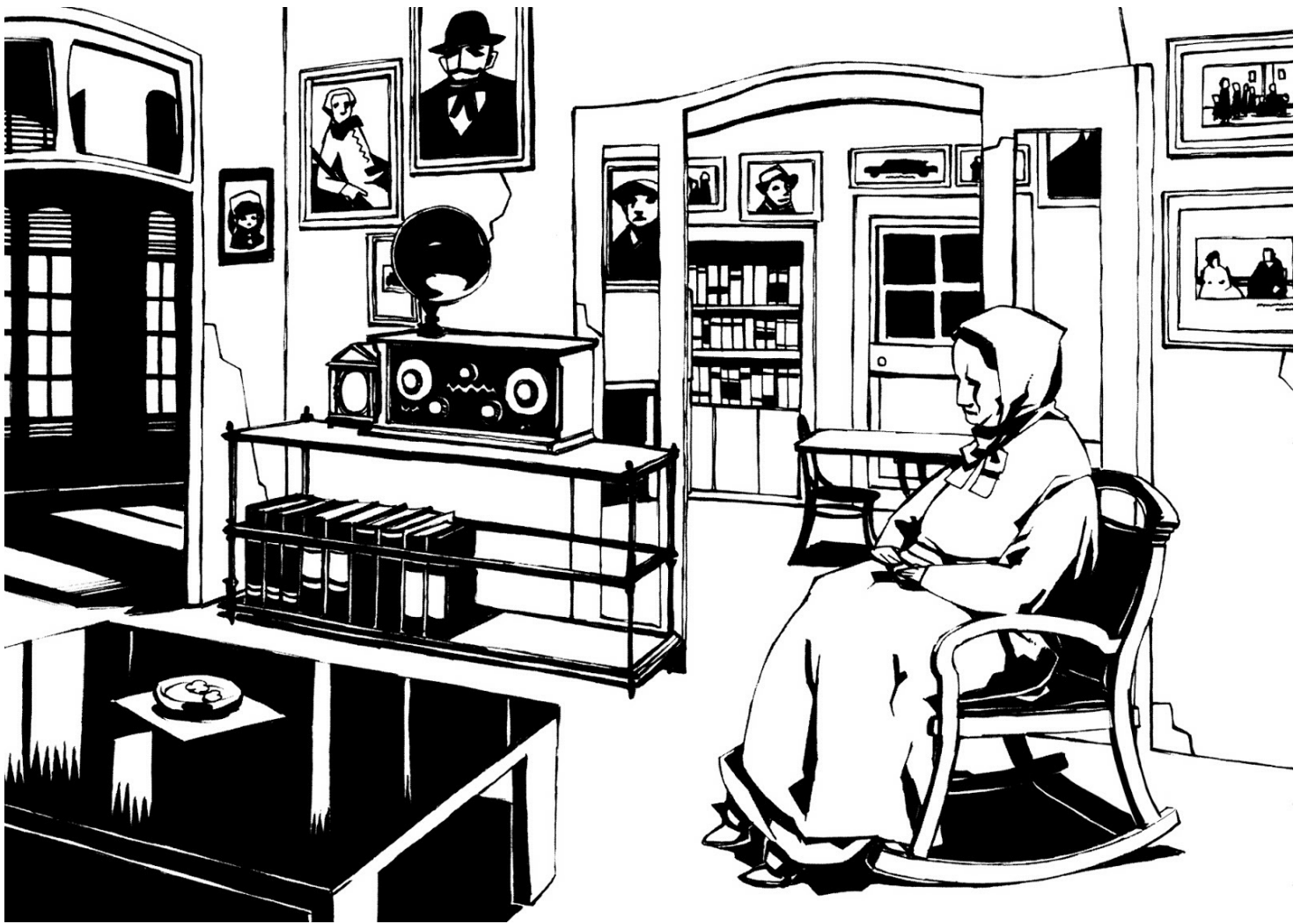
“And now I’ve got a lot of extra weight to prove it. You were quite the heavy eater yourself, but you seem to be in good shape. What’s your secret?”

Kino thought for a moment and answered, “Riding a motorrad all day.”

Kino and the officer finished their tea and gave thanks for all the food they were given before leaving the table.

One went back to his work and the other went back to her travels.





Chapter 3: The Radio Country -Entertainer-

“Good evening, listeners! Welcome to National Radio, where today we’re hosting our most popular biweekly program, ‘Scherzi’s Contemporary Insights’. Mr. Scherzi is joining us again to give his keenest analyses of current events, and might I just add that we received overwhelming responses on both mail and phone on our previous episode, ‘Waste of Energy, Waste of Effort’. Now let’s turn the mic over to Mr. Scherzi.”

“Thank you. Good evening, everyone.”

“I see you’ve decided on a very interesting topic for this episode.”

“Indeed I have. Tonight I’ll be talking about a certain traveler.”

“Could you let our listeners know why, exactly, the traveler is your topic of choice today?”

“Of course. Most of you know that a traveler came to our country four days ago and left last evening. Some of you may even have seen this ‘Kino’ in person.”

“Kino’s visit even made the news. It’s been five years since we had a visitor who wasn’t a merchant.”

“Yes, yes. And some of you may have been happy to hear that an outlander came all this way to see our small, isolated country. Some of you may have felt that we were no longer alone, or were glad to see the traveler leave our gates with a smile and a good impression.”

“Naturally, Mr. Scherzi. Who wouldn’t be excited about our first guest in half a decade? I can’t name any names, but some politicians even threw a welcoming party for Kino at the lodging house built with public tax money.”

“I suppose that could be considered acceptable, in the sense that we were playing host for a long-overdue guest. But think about it. Is this really as heartwarming a story as people want to believe?”

“What do you mean, Mr. Scherzi?”

“Let me be blunt. The traveler was a fraud.”

“This is a shocking accusation, Mr. Scherzi.”

“Yes, but an entirely warranted one. I noted several points of doubt that led me to my conclusion. Let me first begin with our supposed traveler’s age.”

“Ah, yes. Kino was quite young. He couldn’t be past his mid-teens.”

“Precisely. The more naïve journalists wrote about how shocking and inspiring Kino’s youth was, but logically speaking, things simply don’t add up. How could someone so young travel on his own? Why does no one question that simple fact?”

“You may have a point, Mr. Scherzi.”

“Of course, this may vary by country, but Kino is still young enough that he should be attending school. And what of the outrageous parents who allow him to live the life of a wanderer?”

“But isn’t there the old saying, ‘Loose beloved children to distant roads’?”

“An oft-misapplied idiom that has lost its original meaning. The expression comes from a time when going on a journey was nothing but grueling. It essentially held the same meaning as ‘Spare the rod, spoil the child’. Although I do admit that there is great danger in traveling the lawless wilderness between countries. But that brings up another point of suspicion.”

“And what would that be, Mr. Scherzi?”

“The fact that a boy his age could travel across the lawless wilderness.”

“That certainly is an astute observation. But we did see that he was armed.”

“That’s only natural. Only a true Goliath could wander the world unarmed and come out unscathed. But the boy’s choice of arms betrayed his deception.”

“What do you mean?”

“I saw the photographs. He was armed with a 6-shot large-caliber revolver.”

“Could you please elaborate for the listeners who may not be familiar with persuaders?”

“Of course. The revolver is a poor fit for a traveler constantly on the road. This

is getting into technical territory, but that model requires a great deal of maintenance. The propellant, the rounds, and the percussion cap must all be equipped separately. It's an outdated model that demands a great deal of preparation, unlike the unibody persuaders we have today."

"Could you tell the listeners a bit more about this old model, Mr. Scherzi?"

"You see, it takes a great deal of time to reload after firing off the six rounds. I see no reason why anyone would insist on such an old persuader when automatic models that fire twenty, thirty rounds are not difficult to come by."

"To make a comparison, then, it would be like insisting on a quill pen when fountain pens are readily available?"

"Precisely. Excellent analogy. A traveler cannot afford to arm himself with anything but the best in self-defense. Attachments to antiques, no matter how grand they may be, is a recipe for disaster."

"Very sharp, Mr. Scherzi."

"Which is why it's such a shame that the people didn't seem to suspect a thing. I suppose it's one thing to have little understanding about persuader practicality, but this is a matter of possessing common sense. I think people were all too excited about this visit to even think about the suspicious nature of our so-called traveler."

"I have to say, the traveler is sounding awfully dubious now, with so many logical gaps exposed in his choice of weapon alone."

"Naturally. His motorrad gives me cause to doubt as well."

"We're listening, Mr. Scherzi."

"It's simply too big. The chassis, the engine—it's common sense to choose a motorrad that suits your build. There's no need for a boy so small to ride such a large vehicle."

"Our listeners' suspicions are mounting by the minute."

"And they're only going to mount further, I assure you."

"Tell us more."

“He was too clean. The guards and the immigrations officers were quite impressed by his comportment, I hear.”

“That was what they said. Kino has stated that he had cleaned up as much as he could before coming to our country.”

“But how likely is that claim, do you think? If the boy is to be believed, he’s been camping in the wilderness for days. Did he find plumbing somewhere? A warm river to wash in, this late in autumn? His lies simply don’t hold water.”

“I take it to mean that you expect a traveler to be sporting a messy beard with a dirt-stained face?”

“That may be a tad too generic, but it’s certainly more believable than a traveler in perfectly clean condition.”

“Of course, Mr. Scherzi. Kino’s lies are unraveling one after another.”

“Indeed. First impressions are not everything. Some people, however, are skilled at leaving nothing but wonderful first impressions to deceive the world.”

“I see. Many of our listeners must be seething now at Kino’s deception.”

“As I have emphasized, Kino is a fraud. He is simply pretending to be a lonely adventurer wandering the world on his motorrad.”

“Then who, Mr. Scherzi, do you think he really is?”

“Most likely a young man from a nearby country—not the nearest, but quite close nonetheless. He is clearly lying about traveling alone.”

“By that, you mean...”

“He is almost certainly the son of some wealthy family, brought here with his motorrad on a large truck. Traveled in the lap of luxury with a host of bodyguards, no doubt. He must have eaten gourmet delicacies prepared by a personal chef every day and had an endless supply of fresh clothes.”

“And he donned a disguise before he entered the country, you mean?”

“Precisely. He dressed like a traveler, loaded the motorrad with luggage, and armed himself with the persuader to give off the appearance of a skilled marksman. He was no doubt looking forward to the warm welcome we would

give a veteran traveler. Relished the attention and admiration. And quietly mocked the naïve people who were so easily deceived.”

“What a travesty.”

“He was here to look his nose down on us. He must have rendezvoused with his cohorts as soon as he was out of sight. They must be on their way home by now, laughing at our foolishness. And that explains why he only stayed for three days.”

“That is another point our listeners must have wondered about. He insisted on leaving on the third day of his stay, claiming it was a personal rule.”

“Deep down, I’m sure he must have wanted to stay and make fools of us longer. But then he would be risking his cover, which is why he gave the conveniently suitable excuse about his personal policy.”

“That does sound much more realistic than some arbitrary rule.”

“It’s nothing less than a farce. The vile, underhanded fiend is probably boasting to his friends by now about how he so easily deceived an entire country. But now that the truth has been brought to light and broadcast all over, he will be the subject of nothing but shame and reproach, no matter what he does in the future.”

“I almost feel sorry for the boy.”

“In any event, that is the conclusion of this silly game cooked up by an ignorant outlander boy. I do fear for the innocence, or perhaps the unquestioning nature of our people, who so easily welcomed him and took him for his word. The keywords of today’s episode, ladies and gentlemen, are ‘innocence’ and ‘unquestioning’.”

“‘Innocence’ and ‘unquestioning’. You heard it here first, listeners.”

“Yes, the two main themes of tonight’s program. Our fully-educated, rational adults believed Kino’s claims without a second thought. Tell me. What would have happened if he had been more than a harmless prankster? A foreign spy, for instance?”

“It’s chilling to even consider the possibility, Mr. Scherzi. He would have had

no difficulty pulling the wool over our eyes.”

“Now, espionage is simply an example, but not an impossible one. I would personally urge our Ministry of Defense to reflect on their failures.”

“I’m sure our listeners are in full agreement.”

“We as a country are simply too lax—and that is because the people who compose it are lax. I would like to remind you that negligence and naïveté can, in some case, be considered crimes.”

“No one would criticize a child for being naïve.”

“That’s precisely the problem. We assume that children are innocent, but oftentimes they are the ones who see the world with the clearest of eyes. My own nephew, when he heard about the traveler, asked his parents multiple times if it really was true. The boy had seen through Kino’s deception—this four-year-old had gotten closer to the truth than the majority of our citizens.”

“Children do have a way of pointing out the keenest of details.”

“Indeed. We adults should be ashamed of ourselves—perhaps consider putting themselves in the children’s shoes for once.”

“A bold suggestion to be sure. But perhaps we do need to make some bold changes in this country to keep it afloat.”

“It may already be too late. Perhaps we are already sinking. The world never truly improves until the adults are dead and the land belongs to the children. It’s because that is not possible that crises like the one facing us today continue to occur in the world.”

“Where, then, do you think lies the problem in us adults?”

“Our lack of heart, I suppose. I have emphasized over and over again on this program that adults simply do not have heart. We do not even try to live with heart, and fail to realize that we are missing something so important. That is why our country never improves, and is doomed to sink. That is the crisis we face today.”

“Of course, Mr. Scherzi. We adults lack even the heart to criticize ourselves. Now, it’s almost time to wrap up today’s episode. Could you give us a quick

summary of today's discussion?"

"To live in ignorance and unquestioning naïveté is to doom this country to ruin. As I have said many times before, we are on the cusp of destruction. Many people laugh off such claims, which convinces me even more that perhaps this country does need a dose of despair to open their eyes."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Scherzi. Now it's your turn, listeners. We will be waiting for your letters and phone calls on this subject. Next up is the weather report."

*

"Hello? Are you good to talk?"

"Sure."

"Did you hear the broadcast?"

"Is that even a question? The old loon's getting loopier by the minute."

"It was pretty spectacular. I'm not gonna erase the recording this time. Would you believe it? I almost spat out my tea when he started talking about having heart."

"I burst out laughing when he brought up his genius nephew."

"'Dose of despair' was a pretty fun throwback. It's like he never gets tired of acting like he's the only one smart enough to know anything."

"He's never gonna stop yapping about it, so technically he'll be right someday."

"Seriously. I hope the program goes on forever."

"Yeah. By the way, was he right about the traveler?"

"Huh? Oh, the one people were kind of talking about? I didn't really care."

*

"Thank you very much, Mr. Scherzi."

"Thank you."

"Excellent work. Public Relations is probably having a field day with all the

phone calls. I'd be willing to bet they're going to break records today."

"I'm very glad to hear that. But...to be frank, I did see some, well, discrepancies? Holes in the logic? I suppose it doesn't matter at this point, but in any case..."

"Yes? We're always open to criticism."

"About Kino's persuader...the unibody model is convenient, yes, but sometimes it's simply too difficult to find ammunition that fits the unibody standard. It's more convenient to use an analog model that can take any old propellant and even custom-molded rounds. He's bound to have known that."

"You're very knowledgeable about persuaders, I see."

"And another thing..."

"Yes, yes."

"There's a natural hot spring about half a day's trip to the east. Kino likely camped there before entering our country, which explains why he was so clean. This is obvious to anyone who's studied geography, so I suggest you be more cautious on this point."

"I'll talk to the writer. But I promise you, Mr. Scherzi, most of our viewers probably have no idea."

"Of course."

"In any case, thank you again, and I'll see you in two weeks, Mr. Scherzi!"

"Thank you. Good evening."



Chapter 4: The Country of Salvation - Confession-

Once upon a time, there was a traveler named Kino.

Though very young, Kino was a master with the persuader.

Kino's travel partner was Hermes the motorrad. They wandered from one country to another, with Kino's things heaped on Hermes' luggage rack.

One day, they arrived at a certain country.

It stood amongst trees that towered so high that Kino's neck started to hurt. The walls were covered in ivy, almost camouflaged in the woods. It was late spring with a comfortable breeze in the air.

Hermes said, "Looks like the rumors were right."



“Yeah,” Kino replied, “We’d never have found this country if someone hadn’t told us about it.”

When Kino requested permission for a three-day stay, the guard welcomed their first visitor in ages and let them in. The gates opened with a heavy thud.

Beyond was an open plain. Pastures and fields stretched on into the horizon, with cattle making their way across at a leisurely pace. The country was large, but it had a small population and was not technologically advanced. Smoke was starting to rise from the chimneys of the log cabins, perhaps because it was just about sunset.

“Not bad,” Hermes remarked. Kino agreed.

They went to the center of town to find lodgings. Kino asked around for inns or hotels, but no such facilities existed because they had so few visitors. The kindly villagers, all dressed in farming clothes, gathered together and opened up a room in what seemed to be their town hall. It had been a very long time since Kino last slept in a bed.

The next morning.

“What’s that commotion?” Hermes grumbled, waking up early for once.

Loudspeakers hanging from utility poles were blaring some sort of music and chanting. The chanting was incomprehensible, recited in an unfamiliar accent like a magic spell. The music was just as confounding, almost enough to question the composer’s qualifications.

As usual, Kino rose at dawn, exercised and did persuader drills, took a shower, and had breakfast—rations, as there were no restaurants—and turned to Hermes.

“I really like this country. For once I don’t have to smack you awake.”

Hermes replied, “Very funny. But what do you think that weird music is supposed to be? ...Oh, it’s stopped.”

“I’m curious too. I thought I’d seen everything, but I guess I was wrong. Let’s go see what’s going on.”

Kino and Hermes left the wooden building.

And they were swarmed by people.

What shocked them most was the way the people were dressed. They wore alien clothing that Kino and Hermes could not begin to guess at the purpose of, completely different from anything they had ever seen on their travels.

The people asked Kino and Hermes if their religious ritual seemed genuine.

“Was this a ritual?” Kino asked, confused.

The people explained that they had been taking part in a religious ritual, that the faith was shared by countless people the world over, and asked if Kino was not a believer, if their country’s rites seemed just as genuine as the ones Kino clearly must have seen in other countries, and if she thought it was good enough to be accepted by their god.

“Kino?” Hermes prodded.

“Er...” Kino hesitated. “I’m ashamed to say that I’m from a very small country and know very little about your religion. And I’m afraid my visits to other countries have always been too brief for me to observe their rites. I’m terribly sorry.”

Kino was clearly not telling the truth, but Hermes played along in silence.

The people in the strange clothing seemed a little disappointed by Kino’s response. But they quickly recovered and offered to teach Kino all about their faith.

What followed were lectures on the greatness of their religion, its incomprehensible doctrines, and their utterly alien rites. Hermes fell asleep.

Kino did not find relief until lunchtime, when the townspeople gathered at the hall for food. She felt much better after the veritable feast.

One middle-aged woman said over tea, “If only we’d known about the faith sooner. It’s lightened the burdens on our hearts.”

Hermes asked, “Oh? When did it come to your country?”

Kino and Hermes were surprised to learn that the religion had only been brought to the country ten years earlier. A missionary had come to their land, and the faith had spread in the blink of an eye.

The missionary could have easily wielded great power and lived a life of luxury, but he supposedly lived in a small home on the outskirts of the country, occasionally meeting community leaders.

“We wouldn’t be here without him. This country owes its existence to the man,” said one of the men.

Kino asked, “What do you mean?”

The man explained on behalf of everyone else. Ten years ago, the country had faced a terrible crisis: crops refused to grow, livestock did not bear young, dangerous weather conditions persisted, disease ran rampant among the population, and children were not obeying their parents.

Hermes mumbled to himself, “Talk about an exaggeration.” But the people remained dead serious.

Despair and helplessness had flooded the country, and the people were on the verge of taking their lives when the missionary arrived in the guise of a humble traveler.

The missionary had told them, “If you do as I say, you will find peace in your hearts.”

The country had once had a traditional faith of its own, but the people gladly forsook the gods who had failed to lift a finger for them and adopted this new faith. They desperately prayed and hoped and performed the ceremonial rites.

“And then came the miracle.”

Crops began growing again, livestock bore many young, the disease was eradicated, the weather calmed down, and the children became obedient. The land prospered and people were happy and well again.

Kino took a bite out of her biscuit. “I see.”

That was when a man stumbled inside in a panic. “B-b-b-b-b-big news, everyone!”

“Please calm down,” someone said. “Remember, God is watching.”

“Y-yes, but you see! The missionary says he wants to meet the traveler alone!”

“What?” “What?!” “Impossible!” “What?!”

Everyone was shocked.

“The man rarely meets anyone but the leaders of our faith community. Remember that meeting the missionary is a great honor, and take care not to offend!”

With the villagers’ warning in mind, Kino and Hermes headed to the missionary’s house.

They followed the messenger’s truck all the way through the country, past fields and pastures as the people on the farms waved.

“Just follow this road all the way and you’ll see his house. Again, please take care to not offend the missionary.”

Kino and Hermes went into the forest at the edge of the country. Soon they spotted a small log cabin in the woods—the missionary’s home.

When Kino stopped Hermes’ engine, a man stepped out the door.

He was middle-aged, wearing a plain button-up shirt and slacks. The man was very skinny with tidy hair and a clean-shaven face.

“Welcome. Please come in, both of you,” he said quietly.

Kino pushed Hermes inside and propped him up on his center stand by the table.



The man offered Kino a seat, and sat down across from her. He steeped his fingers and gave a dark look. "Did you tell them?"

Kino and Hermes did not understand what he meant.

The man continued. "If you did, I will make sure you never leave this land, even if it means mustering the entire country to stop you."

Kino finally caught his implication. "What exactly do you mean?"

"About the religion I brought to them," the man replied.

Hermes said, "I knew it was a sham." The man twitched. Hermes went on without a care. "Otherwise we'd have heard about it at some point."

"We did not tell anyone," said Kino, "I don't think they'd believe me, even if I did."

"That doesn't matter. If you tell them, I will kill you. You will not leave this country alive."

"I won't say a word. Nor will Hermes."

"I might."

"Then I'm leaving you behind."

"I'm just kidding. I wouldn't tell."

The man breathed a long, heavy sigh. "Good... That's good."

Some time passed in silence.

"Do you have anything else to tell us? May we go back to sightseeing now?" Kino asked.

The man nodded. But the moment Kino rose, he stopped her. "This is all a sham...I was just making things up as I went..."

Hanging his head, the man went on. Kino stared quietly at him. Hermes asked, "You're not a missionary, are you? Were you a traveler?"

"That's right," the man replied, "I was a traveler. And a wanderer. I didn't even know there was a country here when I arrived ten years ago."

"Why did you lie to them? Were you trying to trick the people?"

“No. I was just trying to help. I was walking through town, and saw an exhausted little girl. I taught her a lucky spell my grandmother used to recite to me when I was feeling down. I would have been perfectly happy if it had ended there and she went home happy.”

The man explained what had happened. The little girl had been cheered up by the strange, nonsensical babbles the man taught her. It had been a silly charm meant to encourage her, but she took the story home to her parents and raved about the man. The impoverished and desperate family then went to visit the man in the same room Kino was lodging in now.

“If only I’d let it stop there... If only I’d told them it was a children’s trick...”

The man had combined nonsense spells and exercises from his childhood to fabricate a prayer routine. “The family took my nonsense teachings to their neighbors, and soon they spread like wildfire through the town.”

Eventually, the entire country had been turned believers. Countless people flocked to the man to seek salvation.

“I didn’t want to tell them the truth...”

The man did not push away the people who went to him. He preached to them, ‘This faith has saved the souls of countless people in my homeland and others! It will bring you happiness!’ At times he would spontaneously make up teachings, and at other times he would spend sleepless nights thinking of new rites. He composed music for the first time to create a hymn, and promoted festival garb he had seen on his travels to the people of the country.

“...Such simple, innocent people,” the man muttered, head resting on his hands.



Hermes said, "This is interesting and all, but why are you telling us? Do you want Kino to get you out of here? Do you want to escape?"

The man looked up. Kino flinched.

"Never!" he cried, eyes brimming with tears. There was a magnificent smile on his face. "I never want to leave this place! I am going to stay until my dying day!" he declared, clenching his fists.

"Huh? But why?"

"Because..." the man began, trying to laugh. But he fell quiet and put his fists on the table.

And as Kino and Hermes stared, he began to weep. Tears ran down his face like rivers, streaming down and dripping onto his lap.



“Because...because I found salvation here,” he said, choking on his sobs, “I never wanted to be a traveler. I left home because I couldn’t stand being there anymore, being treated like scum for being born into the lower class. I couldn’t take it anymore.”

The man pulled up his fists. He looked up into the sky and opened his arms wide, as though reaching for the heavens.

“And I made it here. To this country that needs me! This country saved me!”

Kino and Hermes watched silently as the man wept.

“This place is paradise! I was saved by this land!”

Kino turned around and pushed Hermes outside. The wailing man did not see them leave.

“Ahh... There is no god in this world. But! But if there is, I beg of you, please don’t take this place away from me...let me stay here forever...God...”



Epilogue: The Ship Country · A -On the beach · A-

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, soft white fur. I look as though I am always smiling, but that doesn't mean I'm always happy. I was just born with this face.

My owner is Master Shizu. He is a young man who is always wearing a green sweater. He is traveling the world on a buggy after having lost his hometown under complex circumstances.

And I am with him.

It was a warm spring day. The buggy was making its way down a lone path that ran parallel to the beach. There wasn't a single cloud to be seen, and the sun shone brightly from the top of the skies. Everything around us was lush with nature.

To the right was a flat, endless plain covered in thin grass. To the left, just beyond the beach, was the clear blue ocean, stretching on forever into the peaceful horizon.

Whenever we hit a bump in the road, the whole buggy shook.

In the back of the buggy was Master Shizu's beloved sword and a large bag containing everything he needed, including changes of clothes. As for things like camping gear and a tent—things we didn't need when we found indoor lodgings—they were stowed in a box below. Containers of fuel and drinking water were secured on either side of the hood.

Master Shizu was wearing his usual green sweater and a pair of goggles. His hands firmly gripped the steering wheel in spite of the fact that the road was perfectly straight with no obstacles to be seen. He hadn't changed gears once since morning as we made our way across the unchanging landscape.

That was when Master Shizu looked at one of the meters on the dashboard and said, "We're almost there."

He was right. I could see a dark speck in front of the horizon, ahead of us along the road.

As we drew nearer, I realized that the speck was a group of people and their vehicles. About a dozen large trucks fitted with gigantic tires for rough terrain were parked there, about half loaded with mountains of goods covered with tarps, and the other half loaded with fuel.

The trucks were accompanied by about twenty people—all men, mostly seated around a table with a parasol. The rest were keeping watch from atop the trucks. Tents stood on the plains, evidence that the men had been staying there for several days at least.

Master Shizu slowed down.

I said, “So it was true.”

Master Shizu gave a slight nod. The buggy approached the encampment slowly so as to not arouse any suspicion, stopping in front of the men armed with persuaders. Master Shizu waved. “Pardon me, I am a traveler!” he said loudly, “I wish to board the Ship Country!”

Two men approached carefully and looked over us and the buggy. The middle-aged of the two turned. “I wish to ask as a precaution: What do you know about us?”

Master Shizu gave an honest answer: that all he knew were rumors until he heard specific information from the people of a tropical country by the sea. According to the people, a gigantic floating island called the Ship Country had been sailing the seas since time immemorial, and that the country could offer travelers westward passage across the great ocean. It would be a long journey and the traveler would have to earn his keep with manual labor, but he was guaranteed food and shelter.

The people also told him that the only way to make the crossing was by making contact with the merchants who regularly did trade with the Ship Country. The Ship Country regularly dispatched trading ships, which Master Shizu could board with his buggy. This was no legend or fairy tale—it was an established method used by many travelers in the past.

“Very well.”

Once they were convinced that Master Shizu was not a bandit looking to pilfer their goods, the men lowered their guard. And though he always kept his sword at arm’s reach, Master Shizu did not seem to be feeling particularly cautious.

Master Shizu parked the buggy near the tents, hooked his sheathed sword to his belt, and disembarked. The leader of the merchants was a bearded man in his sixties, who invited Shizu for tea and asked him seemingly random questions.

“That is a fine buggy you have there. How much are you willing to sell for?”

Master Shizu politely turned down the offer.

“That is a handsome sword you have there. How much are you willing to sell for?”

“That is a handsome dog you have there. How much are you willing to sell for?”

“That is a handsome sweater you have there. How much are you willing to sell for?”

“You are a very handsome young man. How much—”

Master Shizu turned down every one of his offers.

“We will buy anything you do not need,” the merchant said some time later. “I am especially willing to pay larger sums for machinery. What do you say?”

Master Shizu fell into thought, but soon he replied that he unfortunately had nothing to sell—in spite of the pocket watch he had received in another country, which was still stowed in his bag.

As the people in the tropical country advised, Master Shizu had picked up several bottles of the local liquor to give as a gift to the merchants. Although they were not expensive, they were a delicacy all the same.

The bearded merchant laughed. “Aha! You know how to conduct business, Traveler. Men, make sure to treat our guest with the utmost respect! Good wine deserves no less than its value in courtesy!”

Once we had established a friendly relationship with the merchants, we began to wait for the transport ships.

The merchants invited Master Shizu for tea. He accepted the offer and, as usual, asked about the ingredients. Once he was sure there was no poison in the brew, he sat down at the table and took a sip. The tea was full of sugar and milk—the perfect blend for capping off a day of hard work, Master Shizu noted.

After tea, the bearded merchant said, “Now we wait.”

According to him, transport ships did not always make it to the shore. Once in a while the merchants had to go back with their commodities because circumstances like bad weather would prevent the vessels from arriving. The Ship Country did not schedule specific dates, either, which meant the men often spent about fifteen days at a time sitting on the beach. That explained why they had not unloaded their goods.

The merchants’ country was about a ten-day drive to the east. Their trade goods included fuel, processed foods, clothing, and handicrafts. In exchange, the Ship Country would bring rare shellfish, dried fish, and other valuables from the continent across the sea. These trades had been occurring twice a year for the past two centuries.

Master Shizu asked, “Does that mean that the Ship Country has been moving at the same speed for two whole centuries?”

“Yes,” the merchant replied, “Which is why we can’t afford to miss it. You’re quite fortunate to have made it in time. On that note, why are you seeking passage across to the western continent? Do you have some business there?”

Master Shizu shook his head and replied that he simply wanted to see new lands. He was lying, of course, but the merchants did not pry.

The ships did not arrive that day.

The bright orange sun disappeared past the horizon, and the watchmen with the binoculars climbed down from the top of the truck. According to them, the ships never came after sunset.

Master Shizu joined the merchants for dinner. They provided food in exchange for the wine—a dish of noodles boiled in a large pot, covered in meat

and vegetable broth. They even cooled some down for me to eat. It was quite delicious.

The merchants retired early, going back to their tents with the exception of the watchmen.

As usual, Master Shizu put a large boat on the hood of the buggy to form a makeshift bed on the plains, a short distance from the tents.

The full moon was glowing a pale blue. There was no sign of rain. The air got quite chilly the evening in spite of the season, so Master Shizu pulled a thick blanket over himself.

“I’m counting on you, Riku. Sleep well.”

“Of course, Master Shizu. Good night.”

Once Master Shizu was asleep, I cautiously fell asleep in front of the buggy.

Nothing notable happened, except for the watchmen changing shifts once in a while.

It was a peaceful night filled with the soft crashing of the waves.

The merchants rose early the next morning. Master Shizu did the same.

Everyone in the encampment was on his feet before the sun was up. They were a people accustomed to life outdoors, where not a second of sunlight could be wasted.

As usual, Master Shizu warmed up with light exercises and trained with his sword.

The merchants were busy preparing breakfast or keeping watch from atop the trucks. Whether as a hobby or out of necessity, some of them cast fishing lines into the water.

After breakfast, we simply waited and waited.

It was a monotonous wait. Master Shizu sat on the beach and quietly watched the horizon.

For lunch, they served us tea and biscuits.

“They’re here!” a watchman yelled just as the others began cleaning up after

lunch. “The ships are here!”

The merchants lit a signal pyre they had prepared. The smoke burned a bright orange—perhaps they had soaked the firewood with chemicals.

Soon, a trio of strangely-shaped ships made their way to the beach.

They were identical in appearance, and rather small—about fifty meters in length. The bridge was visible above the bow, which was different from most ships in that it was flat, not curved. The ships were all colored a drab grey.

“These are their transport vessels,” the bearded man explained.

Master Shizu asked, “How will you load your goods? I don’t see a pier anywhere.”

“You’ll find out soon enough. It’ll make a great story to tell on your travels.”

We watched as the man was proven right. The transport ships made their way straight to shore one after another, beaching themselves. Ramps came falling from the bows to form a bridge. It was a brilliant work of engineering.

From what I could see, there was no roof over the hull. The interior was a wide, empty hangar.

“Amazing,” Master Shizu breathed. The merchants started their trucks and two people disembarked from one of the ships.

They were wrapped from head to toe in black clothing—black coats, pants, boots, gloves, scarves, strange pointed hats, and veils. The hats covered the backs of their necks, completely covering their skin. From their height and build, they were probably men.

The bulges at the sides of their coats suggested that they were armed with persuaders.

“Cheerful lot, don’t you agree? These men are the self-proclaimed Rulers of the Ship Country.”

“Rulers, you say?” asked Master Shizu.

“It’s their way of referring to the upper class. The higher-ups. So please try not to offend them. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to go negotiate.”

The bearded man greeted the Rulers. Each side showed the other what seemed to be lists of supplies as they conversed, and eventually they nodded in agreement.

When the bearded man gave the signal, the trucks drove to the ships and backed into the hangars. Each truck unloaded its cargo in wooden crates or transferred its fuel into the tanks of the transport ships, and then drove out to make room for the ext truck. The empty truck would then go to another ship to receive its shipment of goods.

The men in black approached us in the midst of the work. The veils covered their faces, making their demeanor difficult to read.

“Thou art the traveler who doth wish to enter Our country?” one of them asked.

I was surprised first by the man’s archaic speech patterns, then by the youthfulness of his voice. It sounded like he was deliberately speaking that way.

Master Shizu answered that he was. He asked about the cost of ferrying a human, a dog, and a buggy to the western continent.

The price they offered was to work for the Rulers and follow their laws in exchange for food and shelter.

Master Shizu asked, “And what would this work be?”

The men replied that we could either keep watch over the commoners under the commands of the Rulers, or do manual labor with the commoners. It sounded like they offered the latter as a joke.

Lastly, Master Shizu asked how long it would take to make the full crossing. The man in black replied that the trip was about fifteen days long. The Ship Country would follow the shoreline north for about five days, spend another five days or so crossing the strait, and then meet another group of merchants on the western continent five days after that.

“We shall neither force nor reject thee. Make thy decision ere We depart.”

The men in black left. Master Shizu fell into thought, his eyes again locked on the horizon. Then he looked back at the plains. At the continent we had

traversed, the land where Rafah slept. The land where Master Shizu was born and raised.

He smiled.

“Master Shizu?” I asked.

“I’ve made my decision, Riku,” he replied, “I admit it’s a little scary, but let’s make the crossing. Are you all right with that?”

“You do not need to ask my permission,” I replied.

“Goodbye, and safe travels. I will be more than happy to buy from you,” said the merchant.

Master Shizu bade the merchants farewell and backed the buggy into the hangar, just as the merchants had with the trucks. He parked it beside a pile of wooden crates.

Some people inside the ships were not wearing black. Men without hats, wearing thin, patched-up clothing. They seemed to be the commoners, the non-ruling class.

The commoners did not meet Master Shizu’s eyes. They focused on securing the buggy with tarps and ropes as the Rulers instructed.

“Leave the work to them, Traveler, and come this way.”

Another man in black led Master Shizu up the hangar ladder. Master Shizu climbed with me, holding his bag and his sword. Then he glanced down as if he had noticed something.

But he looked ahead once more and followed the man in black. I glanced back at the hangar as well. I spotted several crates in a separate pile, secured behind steel bars.

They were marked, ‘CAUTION: FLAMMABLE’ and ‘HANDLE WITH CARE’. It was easy to guess what must have been inside: ammunition, bombs, and grenades.

We were led into a tiny cabin inside the transport ship.

The room was even smaller than those in the cheapest of hotels. Paint peeled off the metal walls, and pipes stuck out of the ceiling. There was a single round,

dirty window, and a bunk bed that resembled a stretcher. The room was also equipped with a toilet.

The man in black instructed us to remain in the cabin while aboard the ship, told us that we would arrive at the Ship Country Soon, and locked the door. He did not, however, disarm Master Shizu.

The roar of the engines grew louder, and vibrations began to run up the hull.

The transport ship tilted backwards at a great angle and backed away from the beach. The bow dislodged itself from the sandbar and the ship did a 180 towards the sea.

“I see how it works now,” Master Shizu said, looking out the porthole, “What next?”

He sounded like this was all someone else’s business.

The transport ship shook and vibrated all the way as it headed northwest.

Master Shizu sat on his bed with his eyes closed, one hand on the hilt of his sword.

It was almost sunset by the time the man in black finally opened the door. Master Shizu opened his eyes.

“We shall show thee Our country, Traveler. Bring thy belongings with thee.”

Once again we followed the man in black. We went down a long, narrow hallway, climbed a set of stairs at the end, and came up to the starboard deck.

We were in the middle of the sea. There wasn’t a spot of land in any direction. Following behind in single file were the two other transport ships. There was something comforting about the salty ocean breeze.

“The country will soon be visible,” the man in black declared, pointing ahead.

At first, it was a black speck—then a fist-sized figure.

As we drew closer and closer, the country (or rather, its walls) rose up from the horizon. It was a familiar sight in some ways, but not something we had ever seen on the ocean.

“There lies Our home. We shall introduce Thee to Our People upon entry.”

The Ship Country soon displayed its full majesty before the transport ships.

It was difficult to compare it to anything I had ever seen. The entire country was about three kilometers in length, shaped like a long rectangle. Something that resembled a tower stuck out from the middle. Other than its location, it seemed like just another small country.

But this country was floating on the sea. 'Ship Country' was by no means an official name, but it was probably not as accurate as the term 'floating country'.

"Fascinating," Master Shizu gasped. "This is like no country I've seen before."

Lights were blinking at the top of the walls. It was a signal. The transport ships must have signaled back, because the lights on the walls blinked again.

Soon, our ship approached a large gap in the walls. A gate opened, revealing a dark space inside.

The transport ship entered the country as if into the belly of a beast.

Once the final ship was inside, the gates closed shut.

Only when the doors were closed and we were immersed in total darkness did the lights turn on. We were in a long, narrow dock area, which was filled with metal plates, machinery, and the smell of steam and oil.

Our vantage point slowly fell lower and lower. Master Shizu explained that they were draining the water from under us. Soon the transport ship landed on the metal floor.

The man instructed Master Shizu to move the buggy. We drove onto the dock, climbed a ramp, and went through the door he pointed us to. It was pitch-black inside, but soon the ceiling lights flickered on.

The space beyond was massive, easily large enough to fit a hundred cars. It was completely empty save for some rusted scraps in the corner. Most likely, the room was an unused storage space.

"Park where thy heart pleases. It is thy responsibility to drive it back upon departure," said the man in black. Master Shizu parked the buggy at a distance from the pile of scraps. He unplugged the battery, secured the buggy to the floor with ropes, and covered the driver's seat with a waterproof sheet.

“We’ll meet again soon,” Master Shizu whispered, and left the deserted storage room. I followed after him.

We walked down a long hallway with five men in black—three ahead of us, two behind. They had us completely surrounded like we were prisoners, but did not disarm Master Shizu. Light-emitting diodes shone dimly on the grey walls and floors. The hallway continued in a straight line towards the center of the country, with no forks along the way.

At the end of the hall was a large elevator. We took it up to what I assumed was the tower at the center of the country, judging from the location.

After a long wait, the elevator finally stopped. A guard holding a pump-action persuader capable of firing slug shots stood in front of the door. Beyond was a large, round chamber.

The chamber was about 40 meters in diameter, and was situated near the top of the tower with the elevator shaft at its center.

The walls of the circular chamber were glass windows that showed off the ocean and the clear blue sky. The interior was covered in metal and piping. Scraps of wallpaper and ornamentation hinted that the chamber had looked very different in the past.

Chairs were arranged in a semicircle on one side of the room. They seemed to be capable of rotating, as they were facing our direction. Ten people sat in visible range.

They were all covered in black clothing, but from their builds I could make out what seemed to be women and children as well. I also sensed movements out of the corners of my eye. I guessed there must have been about thirty people in the chamber. Some of the seats were empty, likely because there were not enough people to fill them all. And strangely for a ruling class, none of the Rulers were even bordering on plump. Royalty and aristocracy tended to be larger because of their diet.

One of the chairs had especially long legs and thick armrests. It most likely belonged to the captain of this ship. The person sitting there was a little smaller than the others, but also dressed in black. He was likely an old man.

We were led to the captain's seat. Master Shizu was given a chair, and I sat on the floor beside him.

The old captain said in a feeble voice, "Welcome, Traveler. We ask that Thou dost listen to Our story."

The captain went on proudly until the sun was glowing orange on the horizon. In summary, the origins of the country were unknown. The people had lived there for as long as they could remember. The records they had dated back about six hundred years.

The Rulers were known, creatively enough, as the People of the Tower. They had been the ruling class of the Ship Country for a very long time. This tower was their residence, a palace for the country's royalty. They held absolute power over the country and did business with people on the land via the transport ships.

The common people lived on the decks, not the tower. They were divided into clans according to blood relations and areas of residence.

The people in black numbered at about fifty, and the commoners at about three thousand. It struck us as a relatively small number considering the size of the country, which the Rulers confirmed by informing us that the population was decreasing every year.

The country traveled across the ocean seasonally, following the tides. Although the ship was equipped with steering mechanisms, the Rulers did not use them unless there were obstacles in their path.

The Ship Country traditionally welcomed travelers crossing the sea and provided them with work, which involved keeping the peace in line with the Rulers' commands. They acted as police or mercenaries on the ship.

"Thou art permitted to exert force if necessary. The common people have been troubling Us more and more in recent days under the pretense of humanitarian appeal."

That was probably not the best thing for them to tell Master Shizu.

Once Master Shizu was finally permitted to speak, he told them that he wished to do manual labor alongside the commoners.

The people in black were surprised, but Master Shizu said courteously, “It is fitting work for a humble man like myself.”

Was that supposed to be a joke, Master Shizu?

Oblivious to the irony of the situation, the people in black reluctantly granted Master Shizu’s request.

The men in black led us down to the first floor.

We followed the hallway all the way down to a set of heavy-looking doors. Past the doorway was a full view of the country’s walls and decks.

In a typical country, we might have seen roads, buildings, and greenery and parks. But this was no typical country. Our eyes were greeted by interlocking metal parts, glinting black and held together like puzzle pieces.

It looked like some sort of factory, or even a junkyard. The floors were woven out of metal frames, and pipes of all sizes were knotted and twisted together endlessly. We saw no houses.

“The commoners live below,” said the man in black. Master Shizu nodded.

The desolate metal landscape before us seemed to be remnants from another era. Other structures had once occupied the areas above, now replaced by an empty deck relentlessly assaulted by the sun’s rays, which kept the people down below.

The man in black handed Master Shizu a metal plate the size of a small pocketbook. “This is a writ of permission. Even the most foolish of commoners will understand that Thou art a traveler and Our guest. Stay wheresoever Thou wishest. Thou mayest come to Us should thou change thy mind. We shall call to thee once the western continent comes within sight.” Then he opened the door behind us and returned to the tower.

“Hm...”

Master Shizu put the plate in his back pocket and stepped forward with his bag in hand. He chose his steps carefully as he walked across the deck, coincidentally directing himself towards the setting sun.

“Fascinating,” he remarked. I soon realized what he meant. Though the floor

was made of flat sheets of metal, Master Shizu's shadow was slowly drifting to the side. It meant the country was moving almost imperceptibly.

After a long walk, we spotted a set of stairs leading belowdecks.

We reached a residential area belowdecks.

"I am a traveler," Master Shizu said to the surprised commoners, "We have entered this country in order to cross over to the western continent. I have chosen to live and work among you, and I ask that you provide for me work and a place to stay."

Belowdecks was a large, multi-level residential area. Like the hallways, it was also covered in sheet metal and piping. The snaking hallways twisted and turned, and disorderly stairways climbed up and down with multiple landings.

We had seen our fair share of slums and poor countries, but this place went beyond our expectations. It was almost like a metallic cavern.

The color of the metal was black, just like the main deck. A special coating seemed to keep it free of rust. Dim white lights hung from overhead.

It was in this cavernous place that we finally saw people like those we spotted on the transport ship. People dressed in patched-up clothing.

We had to make thirty-four right turns, twenty-nine left turns, and climb up and down six and a half staircases under the curious gazes of the men, women, and children who occupied the area before we reached the Elder's room. It seemed that the concept of houses was foreign to them.

The Elder's room was the biggest in the vicinity—which was not saying much, as it was still so tiny that the Elder, four of the residents, Master Shizu, and I were enough to fill the space completely. Those who could not fit inside poked their heads in through the open doorway. Supposedly, the rooms were so small in spite of the ship's landmass (if it could be called that) because the living spaces were made of metal and piping and thus were very difficult to expand.

"Welcome," said the Elder, a man with snow-white hair and a beard. We naturally assumed that he had to be at least eighty years of age, but to our shock, the Elder—the oldest man in the clan—was at the ripe old age of fifty-five.

The Elder was happy to have us, saying that we did not need to do any work for them. We had no idea if he knew that Master Shizu had asked to do manual labor rather than police them.

Master Shizu asked for fifteen days' worth of food and lodgings, and insisted on working to pay back their hospitality.

Although I expected some resistance, evening came with no disagreements between the parties and the people's day came to a close. The discussion had to be postponed to the next day because they had to cut the power at night. The people had already eaten dinner, so we allowed ourselves to be led to our quarters and ate portable rations. The Elder ordered a man to be our guide—he seemed to be in his fifties, but told us that he was only thirty-five years old.

"This room is excellent," said Master Shizu. "Please convey my gratitude to the Elder."

The room was, thankfully, larger than the cabin we had on the transport ship. The metal walls, pipes, and flimsy bunk bed were the same, but we had blankets and a separate communal bathroom at the end of the hallway outside.

The plumbing was simple but serviceable. Water trickled down from a large metal tank on the ceiling. It was distilled rainwater, but not undrinkable.

Soon the lights went out, plunging us into pure darkness. It was like being inside a cave. I could hear nothing outside, perhaps because the surrounding rooms were empty.

"Well, well." Master Shizu took out a small flashlight to find the portable rations. But soon even that light disappeared.

The rations were nutritious but tasteless. After the brief meal, we spoke quietly in the dark. Not that we had to make the effort, as no one was around to hear us even if we had been shouting.

"Not bad. The room's nice and quiet," Master Shizu said.

I replied, "Thank goodness it's springtime, Master Shizu. The crossing would have been very difficult for us if it were in the summer or winter."

"You're right. Life here must be hard," he said, "although I suppose it's just a

fact of life for the people in this country.”

“The next fifteen days will be a valuable experience,” I said.

“I don’t know if I could call it long or short. In any case, I’m going to sleep now. Good night, Riku.”

“Sleep well, Master Shizu.”

The first day drew to a close.

The next morning.

As we had expected, the people of the Ship Country rose early. Master Shizu and I woke up at dawn out of habit. The hallway and cabin lights turned on not long afterwards, and someone knocked on the door.

We followed the guide from the previous day to breakfast. The paths were no less complex than before, and we were liable to lose our way if we let ourselves lose focus. Master Shizu was, as always wearing his green sweater—but it seemed to be a little hot for him in the crowded, sweltering dining area.

Master Shizu had left his sword inside his bag. It was impractical to carry around at all times, and the only people armed with persuaders here were the Rulers.

We soon entered a large room, about the size of a school gymnasium. The morning sunlight spilled between the ceiling pipes, clearly illuminating the room. The people told us that they left the metal plate of the deck open on days without rain.

The room was packed with so many people I had to wonder where they had all been the previous day. Steam spewed from the next room over, which was presumably the kitchen. People lined up there, received their plates of food and utensils, and sat on the floor to eat. There were thin cushions for seating, but no tables of any sort. Children went around with cups and kettles, handing out tea.

All eyes were on Master Shizu when he stepped into the hall. The Elder called him over from the corner. We went over to him and his attendants, taking care not to bump into anyone.

Master Shizu greeted the Elder, who greeted him back and introduced us to the people. People politely acknowledged us.

One person brought food and tea for the two of us. I was quite happy to not have to line up, but I knew Master Shizu would start insisting on lining up for his own food next time.

“I hope it will be to your liking.”

On the plate was a fish. A single fish that had been steamed whole and sprinkled with salt.

Master Shizu had never been a picky eater. He ate his food without a fuss. For my part, I found the fish to my liking, but they served nothing more after that.

According to the Elder, their meals almost always consisted of fish, served steamed, fried, or marinated. On occasion they caught large fish that they could eat raw. Otherwise, their diet consisted of seaweed, shellfish, and the occasional sea animal.

Master Shizu seemed to want to say something, but held himself back.

The conversation then went on to the topic of work. A continuation of last night’s discussion. Master Shizu finally managed to convince them to allow him to work for his food and board.

“All the other travelers who board our country for the crossing become watchmen on behalf of the People of the Tower,” said the Elder, “We are moved by your empathy, Master Shizu.”

The others expressed their agreement. Everyone thanked Master Shizu for his kindness, but I said nothing. I knew Master Shizu was really doing this because he had to keep up his training, as opposed to being stuck in one place for fifteen days straight.

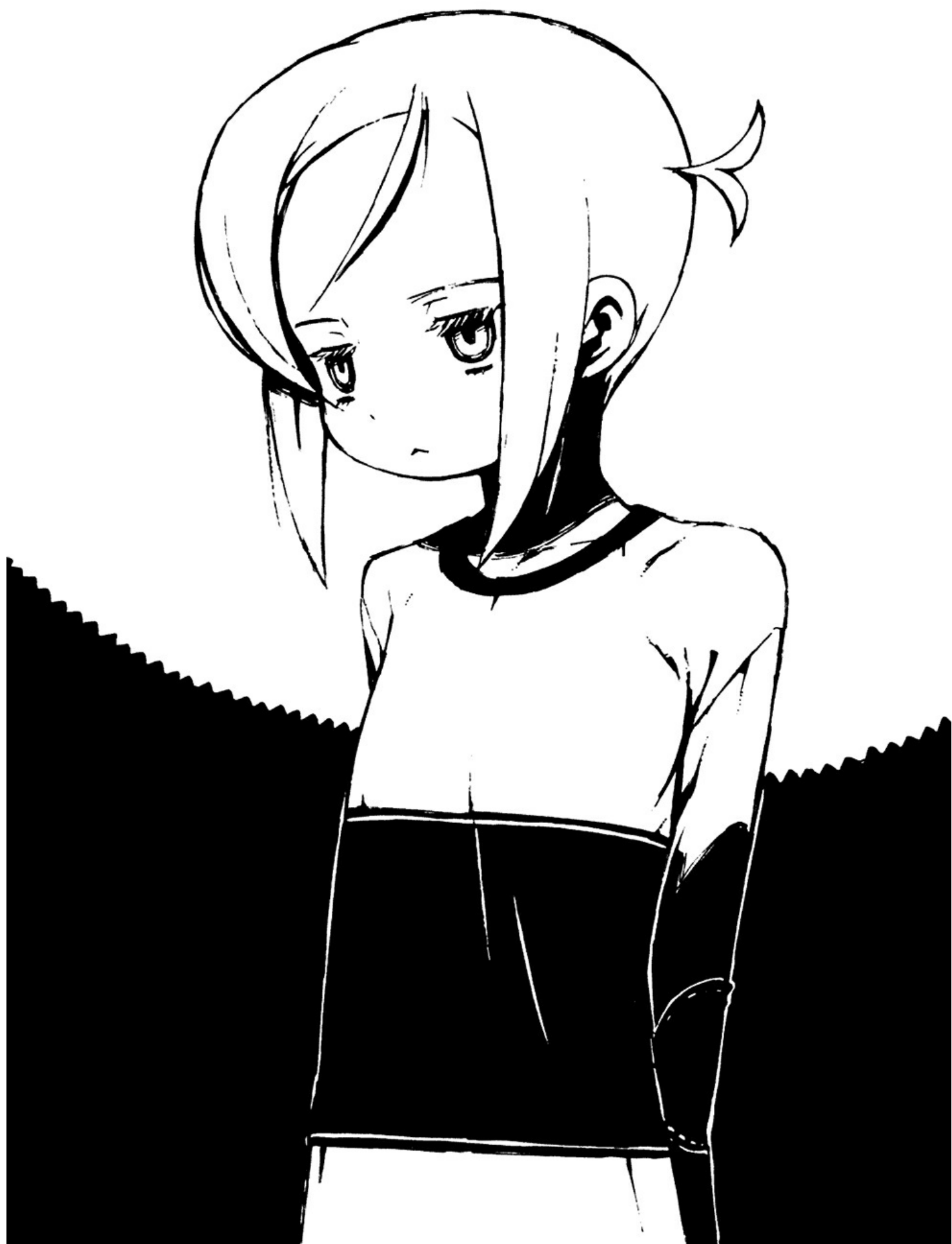
“Now then,” said the Elder, “let me introduce you to your guide. You can ask her anything you’d like during your stay.” Then he called for someone named ‘Ti’.

A little girl emerged from the crowds.

I almost expected them to tell us that she was actually four years old, but she

appeared, at least, to be about twelve years of age. Her hair was cut quite short for a girl and was a shocking white. Everyone else in this country had brown or black here, with the exception of the Elder, whose age explained his white hair. I almost expected them to tell us that she was actually eighty years old.

Her eyes shone an emerald green, which was once again unique to her from the people we'd seen so far. She had a stony face, more stoic than expressionless, without a hint of girlish innocence in her demeanor.



Like the other people of the Ship Country, her clothes had been patched up in places. She wore grey shorts that exposed her stick-thin legs, and a long brown shirt with a round neck. I could not tell if it was brown to begin with, or dirty with wear. There was a large pocket on her back, and protective pads were attached her elbows, presumably to prevent her from getting hurt while walking through the narrow halls. There were thick cushions on her knees as well. She wore rubber shoes without any socks.

The girl gave the Elder a light bow and stood beside him.

“Her name is Tifana,” the Elder said, “and she will be your guide during your stay. Please, call her Ti.” He turned to the girl. “This man is Master Shizu. He is a traveler and a guest, so I expect you to guide him well.”

Ti nodded slightly and stared at Master Shizu.

“Nice to meet you, Ti,” Master Shizu said.

Ti stared in utter silence. Or perhaps she was just looking and not staring.

Several seconds later, the Elder chimed in, “As you can see, she is a very quiet girl. She almost never says a word. I hope you will get along.”

I was very curious as to why they sent someone so quiet to be our guide, but Master Shizu nodded without complaint. “Of course.”

We returned to our assigned room. Ti followed us without a word. Master Shizu tried to speak with her and exchange pleasantries, but her answer was always a resounding silence.

I could not tell how Master Shizu felt, but I was rather flustered. What was the girl thinking? She was clearly listening, however, as she showed agreement by nodding and disagreement by shaking her head.

I tried to get a verbal response out of her, but she simply stared back.

It was almost as though her green eyes were devoid of emotion. It was, however, preferable to her chirping, ‘What a cute doggie!’ and trying to hug or pet me.

When Master Shizu returned to the room, he took off his sweater and put on a green parka over his T-shirt. He buttoned up all the way.

“What now?” he asked Ti.

Ti said nothing. It was a less-than-informative response.

But Master Shizu did not seem to mind. “If there’s anything I can do, Ti, please take me there. If not, could you show us around this place?”

Ti started to walk.

“Do you want us to follow you?” asked Master Shizu.

She nodded.

We followed Ti around the clan’s residential district. Some places had more rooms, and were likely more densely populated. Our room, located a short distance away, seemed to be in a guest area.

We climbed and descended multiple flights of stairs, finally arriving at the most important facility of all—the fishing area. It looked like a giant swimming pool, with part of the floor cut away to reveal a chunk of ocean. The people would lower nets and cast fishing lines, and if possible raise the fish they caught in a separate aquarium nearby. The country was home to several more similar facilities.

Another room was dedicated to energy control. The energy source under the main tower was controlled by the Rulers, who supplied the people with electricity and heat. The control rooms were manned by clan representatives. Men in black would come in on occasion, armed with persuaders, to make sure that things were running efficiently.

The Ship Country also housed classrooms for children, rooms for a ball game I had never seen before, and rooms for housing the sick and injured.

“I see,” Master Shizu said, “Thank you, Ti. I can tell that the people here are living to the best of their abilities. Is that all you wanted to show us?”

Ti responded with silence.

On that note, all of the information we received had come from the people we met in those rooms. Ti would always wait for us quietly and take us to the next room once we had been given the information—which did not seem to surprise anyone. No one spoke to Ti, and no one seemed to want to have

anything to do with her.

Ti started off again with her mouth firmly shut. She led us to the dining hall, where the lineup for the kitchen told us that it was lunchtime.

Master Shizu sat on the floor with a plate of well-fried fish. Ti sat beside him and stoically ate her lunch.

“Thank you for showing us around,” said Master Shizu. Ti’s hand, still holding the fork, froze halfway to the plate.

She looked up and stared at Master Shizu briefly before returning to her meal.

After lunch, Master Shizu asked Ti, “Can I look around somewhere or do some work in the afternoon?”

She simply shook her head.

“Are you saying that I can take a break now?”

Ti nodded. Master Shizu was a regular expert at communicating with her now. He asked her if anywhere was off-limits and about things we were not permitted to do. He asked many questions so he could get yes-or-no answers from her.

I suggested that we ask another person for quicker answers, but Master Shizu shook his head. “It’s fine, Riku. We have a lot of time anyway.”

Thanks to investing his time and energy into conversing(?) with Ti until the dining hall was empty, we learned that there were four clans in the country, including the one we were staying with. Each one held possession of one quarter of the ship. We also learned that it was best to stay away from areas controlled by other clans. The basic rule was that the clans did not associate with one another except during the Elders’ council. That implied that the clans were on bad terms with one another. Rarely, however, there were arranged marriages between the clans.

Master Shizu occasionally asked Ti about herself. But when she shook her head at the question “What about your parents?” he stopped asking.

Afterwards, he told her that she could go back to her room, as we did not need a guide at the moment. However, Ti did not leave. She followed us to our room, sat in the chair, and simply stared at Master Shizu.

I wondered if she was a spy as well as a guide, but there was no answering that question as long as Ti remained silent.

Master Shizu remained equally quiet, polishing his sword and repacking his luggage. He then left to take a shower. I had to watch over Ti, because she tried to follow him in.

We were called to dinner. After dining on fish again, we returned to our room.

Once it was time for the lights to go out, Ti left without a word.

The second day came to a close.

“This trip might be more tedious than I expected,” Master Shizu muttered in passing. I agreed wholeheartedly.

There was almost nothing for him to do on the third and fourth days. Though Master Shizu was insistent that they give him work, the people did not assign him anything. They told us that the country was heading north along the continent, and that they would catch hardly any fish during this stretch of the journey.

There was little an outsider could do in the cramped living spaces offered by the Ship Country. The people were friendly enough, but none of them wanted to get too close to Master Shizu, let him lend a hand with work, or listen enthusiastically to his travel stories.

So for two days, we did nothing but eat our meals.

All we did was go from our room to the dining hall and back again with the silent Ti trailing behind us.

Master Shizu occasionally complained, “I’m going to lose my touch at this rate,” and did chin-ups on some of the pipes on the ceiling or practiced swinging his sword in the tiny room.

Ti watched without a word.

On the fifth morning, we were having breakfast in the dining hall when we heard the voice of one of the Rulers. It seemed there was a loudspeaker system installed there.

“Each clan shall send three men for a day’s worth of labor. You shall not send

any man who has been sent before.”

That was all. The Elder soon called the names of three men.

We guessed that the orders were for the men to go work on the transport ships. The country was trading with more than one group on this continent. It seemed that they were sailing on schedule.

Master Shizu volunteered to go so he could get some exercise and escape his boredom, but he was turned down.

“Another free day,” he groaned.

Ti said nothing.

At dinnertime, the men who had come back from work said that a traveler had boarded.

They said that the traveler was headed for the western continent just like Master Shizu, and that this person had chosen to stay as a guest of the People of the Tower like many others before. The people began to worry that the traveler would unleash undeserved violence upon them as a guard.

“I suppose that’s what most travelers would choose,” Master Shizu said. However, he didn’t seem to regret his choice. If nothing else, if the traveler chose to come and harass the people, Master Shizu might finally be able to get exercise and kill some time. “The choices you make reflect who you are,” he added.

Ti said nothing. She was like thin air. Both Master Shizu and I slowly stopped concerning ourselves with her presence.

It was evening.

The day had almost ended when I suggested to Master Shizu, “Perhaps working for the People of the Tower will be less tedious.”

“Maybe so, Riku,” Master Shizu replied, “But I don’t particularly dislike being here. And maybe working for the Rulers might not be exciting, either.”

“I see. Then you only have ten days to wait.”

Master Shizu said, “And I won’t be making any trouble in that time. Let’s try

not to run into the traveler who boarded today.” Then he changed the subject.

It was almost time for lights-out. The fifth day came to an uneventful close, no different from the past four days.

“Sleep well, Riku.”

“Good night, Master Shizu.”

Ti was here.

The lights went out. Master Shizu turned on his flashlight. Ti was sitting in the chair as if she were a piece of furniture. Now that I recall, we never saw her leave the room.

If she were an assassin, neither myself nor Master Shizu would still be of this world.

“Well, that was a surprise,” Master Shizu muttered. He asked Ti if she could make her way back on her own. She shook her head.

Master Shizu fell into thought.

Ti stared as if nothing in the world was wrong.

Master Shizu soon sighed and smiled. “Would you prefer the top bunk, or the bottom one?”

Ti pointed to the top. She rose from her seat and climbed up the ladder, immediately curling into bed and pulling the blanket over herself before falling asleep.

“She’s sleeping,” said Master Shizu, “I’m counting on you, Riku.” He turned off the flashlight and went back to bed, falling asleep as though nothing had ever happened.

I kept an eye out to see if Ti would do anything suspicious as we slept, but she didn’t even try to leave her bed. The strange night passed.

It was the sixth day since we boarded the Ship Country.

We were eating our steamed fish with Ti when Master Shizu noticed something out of the ordinary.

“It’s shaking.”

Until then, we had not felt movement of any kind. It had been hard to believe that the ship was moving at all—it was like the country had been solid ground.

But things were different now. I could feel slow but massive tremors rocking the ship repeatedly and consistently. The fish broth threatened to splash out of the bowls. Things like this were very difficult to ignore once you had noticed.

“I can feel the ship shaking,” Master Shizu said to a woman who seemed to be middle-aged, who had been eating near us. “Is this normal?”

The woman was surprised that she had been spoken to, but she explained, “This shaking is nothing at all, Master Shizu. There’s nothing to be worried about.”

Master Shizu replied, “I see. Thank you.” He did not pry any further. As long as the locals did not see any danger in the tremors, they were likely safe to ignore. I thought the same.

After breakfast, Master Shizu went around like an unemployed man, asking for work. He was turned down at every opportunity, even by the groups of men who seemed to be going to catch fish.

“They could at least let me help with the dishes,” Master Shizu grumbled, going back to the room. I followed at his side, and so did Ti, in silence.

Master Shizu sat down on his bed. Another long stretch of boredom was about to begin.

An eerie noise.

Master Shizu looked up. “What’s that?” It was a dull, cacophonic scream, the sound of scraping metal and friction between several extremely heavy objects. The sound shook the room, not from one location, but from all around. As if the friction was happening in every direction. Then it happened again. And another, several seconds later.

“It’s stopped,” Master Shizu said, looking at Ti. She remained completely stone-faced. “I’m guessing this happens often?”

Ti nodded. We could tell that the noise did not bother her in the least.

“I didn’t hear anything like this until today. They said that we’re riding the

ocean currents from today on, right?”

She nodded.

“Then does this usually happen when the country is on the open seas, on the currents?”

She nodded again. Master Shizu frowned.

“Master Shizu?”

“Riku. I’ve heard a noise very similar to this once before.”

Surprised, I asked him where he had heard such a thing.

“I was in an old building that had been damaged in an attack. And I heard a sound like this one, but much smaller. I had no idea what it was, but everyone told me that we had to get outside. So I did.”

“What happened then, Master Shizu?”

“Once we’d all left the building...”

Master Shizu and I followed Ti.

Or to be more accurate, we climbed, descended, and generally moved forward through places filled with too many pipes to be used for residential purposes.

Ti used her small frame and knowledge of the location to her advantage and made her way through without a problem. Sometimes, there were places my legs would not reach. I am embarrassed to admit that Master Shizu had to carry me up in those places.

And finally,

“Again.”

Master Shizu detected the screaming of metal. It was resounding through the ship, impossible to pinpoint its origin. That meant it was coming from everywhere. Like we were surrounded on all sides by speakers.

Master Shizu put his ear to a metal pipe and placed a finger on the surface. “I knew it.”

I could tell what he meant without having to listen. The pipe was vibrating slightly.

Before we had left the room, Master Shizu had finished the story.

“Once we’d all left the building, it collapsed. This structure was dozens of stories high, but it just fell. That screaming I heard was the sound of the metal framing bending and skidding against other metal parts. The man who yelled for us to get out was a former engineer. That’s why he knew—a fire had weakened the frame. In other words...I have a very bad feeling about this place.”

And now,

“Ti, are there any places around here that are collapsed or broken? Could you take me to those places?”

Ti stared at Master Shizu and fell into thought. Several seconds later, she nodded and led the way. That was how we came to traverse these unwalkable corridors.

We spent some time passing through an uninhabited area. The paths were so twisted that I couldn’t keep track of which direction we were going in. If not for Ti, we would have been lost.

We finally arrived at the entrance to the wreck.

Until that point, our path was at least wide enough for a person to pass through. But the sight before us was, in a word, a mess. The room was the size of the dining hall, but it was filled with crushed metal. Little diodes shone dimly in the tiny space, which could perhaps fit a single mouse.

“I see. But this place seems like it’s been wrecked for a very long time”

Master Shizu took hold of a railing to go down the stairs, wanting to take a good look at the wreckage.

But Ti tugged at his sleeve.

Master Shizu gave her a surprised look. She held on to the sleeve of his parka, looking up at him and shaking her head.

“You mean I shouldn’t go?”

She nodded.

“I understand. Thank you.” Master Shizu took his hand off the railing. Ti also let go of his sleeve. “How is this country—I mean, ship—constructed? Any ideas, Riku?”

I shook my head. As long as we were on the sea, this country was a ship. But that was as far as I could tell. Master Shizu turned to Ti for help, asking if she knew anything. Ti fell into thought.

Master Shizu continued, “Anything will do. Maybe an old floor plan, some history books, or even monuments.”

Ti nodded.

She led the way out, and we followed. We went up a steep staircase and found ourselves on the deck with a view of the sky.

It had been days since we last saw the sky. We were greeted by low, fast-moving grey clouds. The weather was dreary. The sun was completely hidden, and it seemed like we would be pelted with rain at any moment.

The wind was howling. In spite of the towering walls, gusts were battering the deck mercilessly. If the twisting noise we heard inside was the growl of a gigantic beast, this was its rough breathing. Ti’s white hair and Master Shizu’s parka fluttered in the wind.

“From the look of the sky, I’d say the seas are in an even worse state,” Master Shizu remarked, “Especially considering that we’re in the open ocean.”

I agreed. The walls were likely being battered with ten-meter-high waves. “The sheer size of the country is probably minimizing the effects we feel aboard.”

Master Shizu nodded. He asked Ti if we were close, and she nodded and started walking. We followed after her.

Ti went from one metal plate to another. Ahead of us was the tall tower.

The presence of the tower was overwhelming. The clouds layered behind it would occasionally flash. It seemed a thunderstorm was brewing.

We expected Ti to go to the tower, but to our surprise she turned into a

staircase leading down. Master Shizu and I followed her into the ship again.

“What is this?”

Master Shizu stood frozen in shock.

We were only slightly below the main deck, but in front of us was the ocean surface. A place that should have been a residential area, filled with seawater.

“Has this place been flooded, Ti?”

Ti nodded and continued walking.

“If this is happening everywhere...” Master Shizu trailed off. I finished his sentence, “Then this country may sink.”

“I can’t be sure yet, but that is a possibility.”

Ti finally took us past the flooded area and stopped in front of a door.

She pointed at it without a word.

“You want us to go in, right?”

Ti nodded. Master Shizu slowly pushed the door. It ground against the ceiling and squeaked open, making just enough room for a person to squeeze through. Master Shizu confirmed with Ti that it was safe to go inside, and stepped in.

The room was about ten meters in diameter. If the area had not been flooded, it would likely have been chosen for use by the Elder. Lights hung at regular intervals across the ceiling.

Ti pointed at a metal plate on the wall. It was about the size of a classroom blackboard—although it was a dark maroon, not black. Faint but intricate lines were engraved on the surface.

Master Shizu thanked Ti and said, “This is a blueprint of the country. It’s very old.”

I took a good look. The plate contained a top-down depiction of the Ship Country, a side view, and a basic floor plan.

The top-down view reflected the country’s original design. Walls encircled the round deck, and buildings were standing around the tower. Roads stretched out from the center like the spokes of a wheel. There was a parkland near the

middle, and a residential area.

It was a typical city plan. As we had thought, buildings and grounding had once covered the deck a very long time ago. And the tower in the center was much lower than it was now.

The side view was a cross-section of the country as seen from the center. The deck was consistent with the top-down view, with residential areas and buildings, but what interested me the most was the area belowdecks.

“I can’t believe how thin it is,” Master Shizu exclaimed. We were looking at the same section.

The lower deck much thinner than we had expected. Until now, we had assumed the ship might be like an iceberg, with a great deal of mass underwater. But what we saw was the opposite. The entire country rested on a large, thin plate consisting of the belowdecks area.

The cross-section told us that the plate was essentially a flat wooden crate made out of thin boards held together by short connectors. In other words, what used to be the ship’s underground was not the residential area. It had most likely been intended as a catacomb of maintenance passages for power and plumbing.

Once he had looked over the entire map, Master Shizu brought Ti to the plans. “Can you tell me where my room is?”

Ti pointed to a place on the map very far from where we were looking.

“That’s impressive. Thank you. Could you tell us where we are right now?”

Ti pointed to a place very close to the tower. It was more than a quarter of the country’s distance from our room, so it likely belonged to another clan that might not welcome us with open arms.

“Then,” Master Shizu said, exceedingly calm, “If you can, could you point out places like the ones we visited before? Places that have been flooded or wrecked. You just have to point out the ones you know. Can you do it?”

Ti nodded. She held out her index finger and slowly raised her right arm.

A resounding silence. We had been rendered as quiet as Ti.

Once she had pointed out a dangerous place, Ti waited for about three seconds before moving on to the next. Then the next.

By my count, she had pointed to a total of 143 places. And these locations were spread out all around the country. If Ti was not lying, her memory far exceeded that of an ordinary person. Even as she pointed out the places, we heard the same noise three more times.

Her finger finally stopped.

Ti lowered her arm and looked back at us,

“I see,” Master Shizu said, “Thank you.” He told her she could take a break, and turned to the plans again. “Riku, what do you think?”

“I suppose exactly what you’re thinking, Master Shizu. This country—no, this ship—has been moving for six hundred years without being repaired once. That means...”

“The ship won’t last much longer,” Master Shizu finished. “It’s going to end up collapsing at one point or another.”

“Most likely,” I replied, and felt compelled to add, “Of course, I doubt it will not hold for the next ten days.”

Master Shizu nodded. “I agree. But...”

Ti looked up at him in silence.

Master Shizu used the floor as a desk and reproduced the map on a piece of paper from his room to the best of his abilities. He had always had a talent for drawing. Having made a nearly-identical copy of the plans, he completed the map with Ti pointing out the collapsed areas.

When Master Shizu asked Ti if she could write, she shook her head. We couldn’t tell if she meant she was unable to or if she simply did not want to. Master Shizu did not pry.

It was almost lunchtime, but it was clear that we wouldn’t make it to the dining hall in time even if we were to leave immediately. Master Shizu sat on the floor and took out portable rations from his parka pocket. He broke off the pieces and shared them with myself and Ti.

Ti stared at the clay-like substance briefly, but she brought it to her mouth when she saw Master Shizu take a bite. She nibbled on her piece.

For a single moment, her stoic expression crumbled. Ti's eyes turned to dinner plates.

"Do you like it?" Master Shizu asked with a smile.

Regaining her stoic composure, Ti nodded enthusiastically. She held her portion with both hands like a squirrel and nibbled gravely from the edges.

It was the first time I had seen anyone take so easily to rations, which were infamous among travelers for being flavorless.

After lunch, we went back the way we came—led by Ti, of course. Not even I could make it back on my own without her.

The return trip took us along the same course across the main deck. It was raining.

Thick droplets of rain splattered over us. The world was filled with the sound of water drumming against the metal deck. The clouds hung even lower than before.

Ti stopped at the stairs, looking up at the sky.

"You don't want to get rained on, right?" asked Master Shizu. "It's the same for everyone. But we can't just stay here forever." He gently held the right side of his parka over Ti's head. Her tiny frame clung close to his side. Master Shizu pulled up his hood. "Let's go."

Ti poked her head out from under the parka and stared up at Master Shizu. We couldn't tell if she had understood or not, but Ti went back under the parka and looked ahead.

"What shall I do, Master Shizu?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, Riku," he replied, "but you're going to have to put up with the rain this time."

Of course.

Master Shizu and Ti went out into the rain, matching paces. I prepared to be

drenched and followed right behind them.

Raindrops hit the parka, plip-plopping against the surface of the fabric. Ti and Master Shizu went from one plate to another in the rain. I followed right behind them, completely soaked.

We were about halfway across the deck when Ti stopped. Master Shizu also stopped, confused. I had gone ahead of them and turned to see what had happened.

Master Shizu lifted the side of his parka to look at Ti. The raindrops grew louder now that there was more of the parka to hit.

Ti raised her head and closed her eyes.

It looked like she was listening for something.

“Do you like this sound?” Master Shizu asked quietly.

Ti nodded.

“Then I guess I’ll have a listen too,” Master Shizu replied.



I asked, “What about me, Master Shizu?”

“I’m sorry, Riku, but you’re going to have to put up with the rain this time.”

Of course.

I sat on the metal plate and watched.

The tall Master Shizu and the small Ti.

Wrapped up in the parka, they listened to the mundane sound of raindrops against waterproof cloth.

I watched them, completely soaked. They stood there for what seemed like an eternity, the towering structure and the passing storm clouds in the backdrop.

Although people still did not give him work, Master Shizu had found himself a job and began to take action. He decided to begin investigating the collapsed areas with Ti’s help.

We went to flooded or ruined areas and assessed the extent of the damage. And when possible, Master Shizu asked Ti how long a given place had been in such a state. Ti had about five years’ worth of clear memories, and as we had feared, the rate of damage was increasing every year.

In some places, the cause of the flooding was clear—the floor of the ship had split open. The thin plate holding the structure together had forty-meter gashes through them. According to Ti, they grew in size by about two meters a year.

That was what we did for the seventh and eighth days of our stay. Master Shizu was not the only one keeping busy—Ti was working just as hard.

On an unrelated note, we consumed a large portion of our rations over those two days. I worried if we would have enough supplies once we reached the shore, but Master Shizu did not seem too concerned.

“We could always camp by the beach for a while and survive on fish.”

More fish?

The ninth day.

The tremors continued, although they were not as strong as before. We still

heard the occasional screaming of metal—but after a while we grew used to it. That was not a good thing.

After breakfast, Master Shizu requested to speak with the Elder. He visited the Elder and asked that everyone else leave the room. Ti, of course, remained at his side.

Master Shizu discussed the damage the ship had sustained. However, he did not definitively claim anything about the island's possible future. He simply noted that he had discovered flooded places while walking with Ti, and that he was worried about the country's safety.

The Elder remained perfectly calm and told us that there was nothing to worry about. "The People of the Tower know everything there is to know about this country. They will warn us of any impending danger."

We knew almost nothing about the People of the Tower and could not agree with the Elder, but we did express our concerns to him. And as expected, it seemed the common people here were completely oblivious.

Master Shizu then inquired about the lives of the people. He slipped in questions about things like infant mortality and average lifespans.

"I see..."

The answers were much more horrifying than we had expected. They were not shocking in hindsight, considering the awful living conditions and the limited range of foods available for consumption.

This was the people's beloved home. But even if the ship were never to sink, it would at some point run out of inhabitants.

The Elder proudly declared, "We live perfectly satisfactory lives here. We always have, and always will."

Ti's silence seemed to have infected Master Shizu.

It was evening. Master Shizu sat next to the bed, hands clasped together. Sometimes he would tap his own forehead.

Ti sat in a chair beside the folding table, watching him. She held a mug of tea Master Shizu had brewed her with solid fuel.

There was still some time left before dinner. Though I knew it was impudent of me, I broke the silence and asked, “Master Shizu, why not get some rest, or try a change of pace?”

He glanced at me. “You’re right, Riku. What will be the most fun, do you think?”

Master Shizu was clearly joking. This was a country of cramped rooms and hallways—it would be difficult to find any entertainment here.

That was when Ti put down her mug and rose from her seat. She walked up to Master Shizu and pulled on the shoulder of his parka.

“You want us to follow you? Is there some place we can relax?”

She nodded twice in reply, like a programmed doll.

“It’s beautiful.” “Magnificent.”

Master Shizu and I could not hide our wonder.

Ti had taken us up to the top of the country’s walls. We had left our room and followed her through the halls, climbing up what seemed to be an endless spiral staircase before opening up a hatch and finding ourselves on the windswept artificial cliffs. The top of the wall was a ten-meter-wide pathway, lined on either side with metal railings.

Before us was a sight I could only describe as breathtaking. The sun sank into the horizon, casting columns of orange light between the grey clouds. Tall waves crashed against the wall, creating sparkling droplets of light.

All we could see from the western wall was the sea. It was almost like—

“It feels like I’m flying,” Master Shizu exclaimed, hands gripping the railing. It really did.

For some time, Master Shizu and I simply stared at the world before our eyes. But eventually he looked back at Ti, who held on to the edge of his parka.

“Thank you, Ti,” he said, “This is incredible. To be honest, we’d more or less given up on seeing anything beautiful in this country, but I’m glad you proved us wrong.”

Ti was as silent and stoic as ever, but something about her expression looked very satisfied. The wind ran through her snowy white hair as we stood on the wall.

The sun finally set, and the afterglow lit up the clouds until we were finally swallowed by darkness.

We stayed there until we could not distinguish the sea from the sky. Ti had been so awestruck by the scene that she had refused to budge. Master Shizu had stood there with her.

In the end, we missed dinner and found ourselves munching on rations in our room instead.

I watched Ti wolf down her portion and wondered if this had been her goal from the beginning.

Ti said nothing.

It was late that night.

Master Shizu whispered, “The people here don’t understand the situation—they’re not capable of it. That means it’s all up to what the Rulers think of the situation.”

“I agree.”

The lights had gone out for the night, and the room was blanketed in darkness. I stuck next to Master Shizu’s bed and continued the conversation, making sure not to wake Ti, who slept on the second level.

“If the Rulers don’t change their position, this country has no future,” Master Shizu declared. The map we had completed over three days of research was covered in black marks that indicated collapses. The damage was spreading at an unbelievable speed.

“Yes, Master Shizu. At this rate, the country will collapse—whether by sinking or by a die-off. Neither fate is too far off.”

“And none of these people know—they have no idea that they’re living in hellish conditions, that this country isn’t the paradise they think it is.”

“Everyone here considers their living conditions to be natural. Telling them

that there are better possibilities will not convince them.”

“They say that a problem that’s been ingrained into a society isn’t considered a problem. It’s completely true.”

Silence followed Master Shizu’s declaration. He was lost in thought. Metal screamed around us again.

“I’ve decided,” Master Shizu finally said, “I’m going to have a talk with the Rulers tomorrow.”

“Just talk with them? You won’t try to convince them, Master Shizu?”

“We have to see how they feel about the matter first. Good night, Riku.”

Master Shizu fell asleep.

I had no idea what tomorrow held in store, but it seemed that, at least, no one would be bored.

The tenth day.

If the ship was moving on schedule, we were likely quite close to the western continent. The country would soon head southward along the currents that ran down the continent.

The country was scheduled to trade with merchants on the continent in four days’ time. All Master Shizu and I had to do was arrive there safely. We could say goodbye to the country as if nothing had ever happened. We would never need to set foot here again.

After breakfast, Master Shizu took out his sword for the first time in nine days. It seemed his course was set.

Then he took out two small cloth pouches from his bag. He checked their contents. Each bag contained what looked like spray cans, but the objects were actually much more dangerous than they appeared. Master Shizu did not use them if at all possible, but it seemed he thought they might have been necessary this time. In the best-case scenario, he would never have to use them.

Master Shizu hooked the pouches to the right side of his belt and vertically concealed his sword under his parka.

“Stay here for now, Ti,” he said. We left the room as she watched curiously.

Then Ti followed us out as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Look, Ti,” Master Shizu said, “I don’t think I have anything for you to do today. Please wait inside.”

Ti stared.

“Things might get dangerous out there, Ti.”

Ti stared.

“You see...”

Ti stared.

“I mean...”

Ti stared.

In the end, it was an overwhelming victory for Ti and her silent arguments. Master Shizu hung his head. We couldn’t exactly tie her to the room.

“I’m counting on you, Riku.”

So it fell to me to act as her guardian.

Master Shizu, Ti, and I went back the way we came when we first arrived on the ship, climbing onto the deck.

The sky was dark, the sun hidden behind the clouds. The wind was feeble but the sky seemed to loom heavily over us.

Once we were outside, Master Shizu took out his sword and secured it to his belt. “Let’s go.”

Master Shizu began walking towards the tower. I had Ti follow behind me, and followed Master Shizu at a slight distance.

It was clear that we were in full view of the tower.

“Halt, Traveler,”

We were not particularly surprised by the voice, which was projected from a speaker on the tower. Master Shizu stopped about ten meters from the tower entrance. “Hello, can you hear me?”

“We do indeed hear thy voice, Traveler. Several days yet remain ere this land reaches shore. Hast thou changed thy mind? Thou dost wish to live among Us?”

“No,” Master Shizu replied, “I merely wish to speak to you. It is a matter concerning the future of this country.”

“Very well. We shall lend thee Our ears. Speak.”

It was a different voice from before, but a familiar one—the captain, whom we met the day we first arrived.

Master Shizu told the captain about his opinion on the country’s situation. He told him how we had investigated the country and found problems that could not be contained, both structurally and socially. He also added that the people were oblivious to the problems.

“You are the leader of this country, with the lives of thousands weighing on your shoulders,” said Master Shizu, “So I ask you: how do you view these problems?”

The captain’s answer was immediate.

“We are unconcerned.”

I could not see, but Master Shizu was likely frowning. He asked, “What do you mean by that?”

Once again, the captain’s answer was immediate. “Should Our country fail to sustain itself, as thou dost claim, then that shall be Our fate.”

“Maybe it doesn’t matter to you, but what about your people? What will happen to them?” Master Shizu demanded emphatically. Ti and I listened to his every word.

The voice replied, “This country is under Our rule. Both the land and its people belong to Us. Anything that should befall our possessions is simply Fate. Merely the end. Lowly travelers like thee have no business meddling in Our affairs.”

We had been half-expecting this answer, but not the bluntness with which the captain delivered it. Master Shizu would not stand for this.

“I see. I understand,” he responded. There was no way he would go on to say, ‘Then we’ll see you in four days’ time’. Instead, Master Shizu said, “Then if I should take over the tower and steer this country towards land...then you would consider this your Fate?”

“Verily.”

The tower entrance opened.

A figure clad in black, wearing a black veil, appeared before us.

The person was rather slight, but wore the air of an experienced fighter. The Rulers had probably sent out their most skilled warrior to serve as their champion.

The champion was armed with a meter-long pump-action shotgun-style persuader, and a hand persuader hidden under the coat.

The captain said over the speaker, “Yet We cannot allow thee to do so.”

“Right,” Master Shizu muttered, almost sounding as though he welcomed the response.

The conversation was over. It was now time for persuasion. I nudged Ti off to the side, as standing behind Master Shizu put us in the line of fire.

“Let me say one thing,” Master Shizu said, once Ti and I were safely covered behind a pile of scrap metal a short distance away, “I would prefer not to kill the Rulers, including you. Would you please allow us to pass?”

Instead of a response, we heard a click. The sound of a persuader being loaded.

“So you’re not going to let me pass.” Master Shizu did not draw, but he slowly closed the distance between them. “Listen to what I say, and you’ll all live,” he said, trying to distract his opponent with conversation while discreetly closing the gap between them—one of his favorite strategies.

Each shotgun round contained nine or so round pellets, which scattered in every direction upon being fired. It was a dangerous weapon, but not so effective at close range where they did not have the room to scatter far, giving Master Shizu room to evade.

Pump action persuaders also had to be reloaded with a full pumping action after each shot, and their long barrels made it difficult to aim in close quarters. Master Shizu was using the time he bought to step in close in one quick movement. The battle would be decided the moment his opponent pulled the trigger.

“Calm down. I don’t intend to take your life.”

Master Shizu looked up at the tower as he approached the warrior, making sure there were no snipers stationed overhead for support. I had been looking as well, but saw no such person thus far.

There were now five meters between them. The Rulers’ champion was steadfastly refusing to open fire, clearly confident and self-assured.

Master Shizu never took his eyes off the opponent, whose barrel was still pointed at the sky.

“Not bad,” he said, thumb reaching his scabbard.

Ti watched them both from on top of me.

A second later, Master Shizu moved. His foe had finally moved, shouldering the persuader and taking aim. Master Shizu must have followed the aim and noted the champion’s trigger finger, as he evaded without drawing.

There was a blast.

Shotgun pellets tore through the air. Master Shizu drew and struck.

There would be no time to reload. No time to aim.

It was Master Shizu’s victory.

But the Rulers’ champion did the unthinkable.

“What?!” Master Shizu gasped—understandably, as the champion immediately threw away the pump-action persuader as though swinging a spear. The shot had been a ploy from the start. What kind of fool would throw away a persuader in a fight, I wondered, and had to remind myself that I was watching one right before my eyes.

“Damn it!” Master Shizu parried the surprise attack. The persuader was

heavy, however, and slowed him for an instant as he tried to close the gap.

And in that tense moment, the champion drew a hand persuader and took aim. I could barely follow the scene with my eyes.

Master Shizu stopped in his tracks and took a step back, taking a defensive stance. He could not close the distance in this situation. The large persuader he had knocked away finally fell, clanging loudly in the background.

“That was quite the surprise,” Master Shizu remarked, sword still raised. The persuader was trained on him. They were at a deadlock.

“I could say the same,” said his opponent, casting aside the black veil.

“Wha—” “What?”

Master Shizu and I could not hide our shock. Ti gave us a curious look.

“Kino!” Master Shizu exclaimed. The Rulers’ champion was the final opponent Master Shizu had faced at the coliseum back in his homeland. She had defeated him in the final round.



Kino pulled off her hat and veil with her free hand, dropping them on the metal floor. Her short, slightly messy hair was exposed to the wind. “It was good of the Rulers to provide me clothes, but they’re not easy to move around in,” she said.

“What are you—” Master Shizu stopped himself. He knew the answer already.

Another traveler had boarded for the crossing five days ago—Kino. In other words, she had chosen to work for the People of the Tower and was here at their request.

“This is some reunion,” Master Shizu said, relaxing his grip with a smile.

Kino replied, “Yes, it is. I’m glad to see you’re well.”

“Thanks. The same for you.”

“Thank you,” Kino said, and asked, “So...what was your name again?”

I could not tell if she was being serious or if this was some psychological attack, but Master Shizu seemed very disheartened. “It’s Shizu.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Kino replied, “And your friend’s name was Riku. I remember.”

That was rather cruel. Master Shizu must feel even more wounded.

Kino continued, jumping straight to the point, “In any case, I pledged to work for the Rulers here until we reached the western continent. I would rather not fight you, but I have to consider my own priorities first. Would you please go back?”

“I refuse.”

“You’re not a citizen here,” Kino argued, “I don’t understand. Why would you go so far for these strangers, who didn’t even ask for your help?”

It was very much like Kino to remain coldly logical and rational. And in most circumstances, she would be in the right. A traveler’s first duty was to keep oneself safe. Travelers had no obligation to concern themselves with the matters of other countries or people. To risk her life for them was insanity.

But Master Shizu replied immediately, “Because I realized something. I can do

something to give all these people a future.” I could practically hear his grip tighten. “So I feel like I just have to try, you know?”

I could not see his face, but I knew Master Shizu was wearing a smile.

“I see,” Kino replied, tensing, “That’s very unfortunate. I have no choice but to do my job.”

“Round two, then?”

I could see Master Shizu tense as well.

Kino’s revolver was already at waist-level and trained on Master Shizu, but he could likely deflect the shot.

I thought for a moment that they were once again at a stalemate, but Kino surprised us yet again. She turned her persuader on myself and Ti.

“No!” Master Shizu cried, scrambling to draw. Kino pulled the trigger.

There was a bang, and a plume of white smoke. Kino’s right arm recoiled into the air.

And the bullet.

The bullet passed over Ti’s head as she stood unmoving. In fact, it passed very high over her, likely hitting one of the metal walls in the distance, but we heard no impact. Now we knew what Kino had intended.

Master Shizu had panicked for only a moment, but in that moment he had turned his back on Kino.

“What?”

And in that moment, Kino turned and bolted, sprinting into the tower at top speed and disappearing inside.

It would be nearly impossible to counter shots fired from a covered tower. Master Shizu quickly moved away from the entrance and dashed towards the tower, sticking close to the right side of the open door. “Not bad,” he chuckled.

Before I could think, Ti rose without a word and rushed towards him. We were safe from Kino for the moment, but we were still exposed to attack.

I finally caught up to her at the tower entrance. Ti stood on the left side of the

door, opposite Master Shizu. I stood at her feet.

“It’ll be over soon,” Master Shizu said reassuringly as she watched, worried. He sheathed his sword and took out one of the spray cans. He held down the lever and pulled the pin with his teeth. “Ti, cover your ears.”

As soon as he had made sure Ti’s ears were covered, Master Shizu yelled into the entrance, “Give up now, Kino, and I’ll spare you!”

I’d heard those words before. And I knew there was no way Kino would surrender.

“I refuse!” Kino replied, her voice echoing from the hallway.

“Of course.” Master Shizu nodded and tossed the can inside. The lever on the side fell off in midair.

The object rolled into the hallway and disappeared. Then it exploded.

First came the brilliant flash of light, and a sonic wave. We saw a long, thin sliver inside the door.

The object Master Shizu had thrown was a special weapon called a flashbang, also known as a stun grenade.

A flashbang ignited and exploded four seconds after the pin was pulled and the lever fell away. It worked the same way as a normal grenade, but instead of releasing a lethal blast of energy and shrapnel, it created a flash of light and a loud blast. I could not cover my ears, so the sonic boom hit me hard. My head was spinning.

And if I felt this much shock from outside the corridor, Kino must have been incapacitated. If she were unconscious, it would be Master Shizu’s victory.

Once the faint smoke had cleared, Master Shizu drew his sword again and tentatively stepped inside. He held the sword in front of him to deflect any bullets flying in his direction. I desperately struggled to keep Ti from poking her head into the doorway.

“What happened?” Master Shizu wondered, confused, and continued before I could even ask, “She’s not here.”

I peered inside. So did I.

Master Shizu was the only person in the dark hallway. Kino was nowhere to be found. At the end of the 20-meter corridor was the door to the elevator hall, which was firmly shut.

Perhaps Kino had taken cover behind the door. But her voice earlier had indicated that she was much closer. There was nowhere to run.

Master Shizu had made it about halfway down the hallway when Ti stepped on my paw.

“Ouch!” I exclaimed. Master Shizu turned.

We both looked at Ti. She pointed at the side of the hallway.

Master Shizu ran over to check. And he found what she had noticed.

“Thank you, Ti. Stand back.”

I was not surprised that Ti was the one who made the discovery. She was pointing at a large shaft that seemed to be for ventilation or sewage, with a lattice covering on the opening. The covering was not fixed.

Master Shizu gingerly removed the cover and slid into the shaft. Eventually, we heard the sliding stop.

A second later, we heard Master Shizu cry out, followed by the sound of breaking metal, and something collapsing. He seemed to be battling Kino, who had escaped downstairs.

We could not hear any gunfire. Several seconds later, the sounds of battle stopped. I looked into the shaft, wondering if I should follow.

“Whoa!”

Ti pushed me. I fell straight in, sliding in an uncomfortable position and landing head-first at the foot of the stairs. It hurt very much.

I glimpsed Master Shizu’s back the moment I fell, but he was quickly obscured by Ti’s legs. She had followed me down. I counted myself lucky that she hadn’t stepped on my nose.

“She got away,” Master Shizu said, sounding a little happy.

We were in a large hallway. The floor under our feet was made of metal.

Pipes ran all along the walls around us, and lattice-shaped metal plates lined the ceiling. Light-emitting diodes on the walls made the room brighter than the hallway.

Master Shizu's sword was trained on a three-way intersection.

"She got to take a nice shower," Master Shizu explained. There were puddles on the floor, and a water tank that should have been on the ceiling was rolling at our feet, having been split open the long way. Master Shizu had cut it open and kicked it at her. It was easy to see where she had gone. The trail of water led to the right.

Master Shizu and I moved. I followed at a slight distance, and Ti followed after me.

Cautiously, Master Shizu turned the corner. Kino was not there. Instead we found another three-way intersection. Master Shizu followed the trail. The droplets continued on.

After more walking, we came across another intersection—this time a four-way crossing. The trail led left. Master Shizu, sensing a trap, checked the right before following the water.

"Stand back," he whispered as soon as he turned the corner. Ti and I stopped in our tracks.

We heard a droplet of water fall. Then again, and then again.

Water was falling from the latticed ceiling panels about five meters ahead of Master Shizu, leaving a puddle on the floor. Ten meters further down was another four-way intersection, with no trail in sight.

Master Shizu prepared his sword and took one careful step after another.

The moment the puddle came into his range, the ceiling tiles opened with a clunk, flying into the air as a dark figure fell out of the opening.

"Ha!"

Master Shizu cut the figure as it fell. He knew it was not Kino, but a trap she set with ropes.

As we had expected, the object was a wet black coat. Master Shizu's sword

slapped it away, and it hit the wall with a squelch. Master Shizu quickly turned, realizing that Kino could easily shoot him from the intersection.

Another figure fell from above—right above Master Shizu. Was it Kino?

Master Shizu knocked away the object with the blunt side of his sword.

There was a sharp noise, and a half-empty water tank hit the wall and fell to the ground with a crash. Another trap.

I heard footsteps coming from the left corner. There was no mistaking it.

Master Shizu broke into a run. He would close the distance and take on Kino before she could respond. He ran under the opening. Kino emerged from the ceiling, swinging down head-first with her knees hanging on to the opening. She was wearing the same black jacket as before. Revolver in hand, she hung with her short hair upside-down.

The revolver was pointed directly at Master Shizu's back. She had been in the ceiling all along. The noise from the hallway had been the real trick.

"Damn it!"

When Master Shizu noticed Kino, he was probably looking at the barrel of her .44 caliber persuader and her upside-down face behind it.

A heavy gunshot shook the hallway.

Master Shizu had lost again. He crumpled to the floor.

The first thing Master Shizu saw when he awoke was Ti's face, her green eyes staring down at him in silence. It had only taken five seconds for him to lose consciousness. Kino skillfully landed on one arm, and leaned Master Shizu's sword against the wall.

The mark of taking a shot a point-blank range showed prominently on Master Shizu's forehead. A big black bruise. I suspected it would soon grow to a swollen bump.

Ti was holding the bullet that had shot him.

"I'm alive...? How?" Master Shizu asked, sitting up. Ti quickly stepped away.

Kino explained, "They said I couldn't lower the population."

Ti showed Master Shizu the object she was holding. It was a hard piece of .44 caliber rubber. A nonlethal rubber bullet. That explained why we heard no impact when she shot at us earlier. Kino told us that she had used significantly less liquid propellant than usual. “They told me to use these rounds.”

“So I lose again,” Master Shizu muttered, and turned to Ti.

Although he had not died—or rather, because he had not died—Master Shizu knew he had to admit defeat. To leave the people of this country, including Ti, to continue living in squalid conditions until they reached their inevitable doom.

“I’m sorry,” Kino said, “But I’ll have to ask you to not cause any trouble for a few more days.” She had already holstered her persuader, but I knew she could draw again in a moment’s notice.

I wondered what Master Shizu was going to do, when one of the Rulers spoke through a speaker.

“Kino, can you hear us?”

“Yes, I can hear you,” Kino replied, “I’ve finished my job. And as I requested —”

“Kino, can you hear us?” the voice asked again, “Are you safe?”

“I can hear you,” Kino said loudly, but the voice continued to search for Kino.

“Answer if you can hear us!”

It seemed that the Rulers could not hear anything.

“They should be able to hear my voice as long as I’m in the tower. What’s going on here?” Kino wondered.

That was when a voice came over the entire ship.

“Traveler Shizu. We cannot permit thee to do as thou dost please.” The captain. He sounded upset, and seemed to be under the completely wrong impression. “This land shall now make its way back to the sea.”

“What?” Kino demanded, “Wait!” But her voice did not reach the captain. We heard something moving beneath our feet, and felt vibrations running through the ship. The sound of a propulsion system, completely different from the

tremors we felt during the crossing.

“No... They’re moving the country!” Master Shizu exclaimed.

Ti nodded.

“Wait! Then what happens to me?” asked Kino.

Although they did not hear Kino’s question, we received an answer.

“This country shall never see land again. Live with the people until thy death, wayward traveler.”

The shaking continued. We could hear the propulsion system running, and the sound of screaming metal. The land was being pushed to the limit in that very moment.

“Well,” Master Shizu said, getting to his feet. The bruise was still prominent on his forehead. But he wore a smile on his face. “What do you say, Kino? I’m going to go up the tower and take over the controls. Then I’ll steer this country to land, even if I have to use force. Do you want to join me?”

“But I won that one,” Kino grumbled, handing over the sword.

“What?! Damn you, how—”

Master Shizu struck the man with the blunt side of his sword before the question was even out of his mouth.

Other than the elevator, the only way up the tower was a long spiral staircase. Master Shizu led the way, followed by Kino, myself, and Ti.

Master Shizu mercilessly tossed aside the men in black who stood in our way.

“You would dare try to overthrow—”

Although she did not seem very enthusiastic, Kino would shoot rubber bullets at the heads of the Rulers who suddenly popped out of the doors. We continued making our way upwards.

“Take the door on your side,” Kino said, “I need to get something.”

Master Shizu nodded and opened the heavy door. Immediately, two people jumped at us with knives, but Master Shizu knocked them out with the blunt side of his sword and his scabbard.

Then he saw what was inside. “Incredible,” he gasped.

Stacked inside the room were countless wooden crates, filled with things like ammunition and explosives. It was an armory.

Kino said, “Let’s take a few things. They have some of those loud grenades, too.” She opened one of the crates, taking out a flashbang and tossing it to Master Shizu.

Ti was behind me. For a brief time, I lost track of what she was doing.

We glanced at the fallen men in black as we resumed the upward climb.

There were not many of them. The rest of the Rulers were in the control room on the top floor.

We defeated the guards at the entrance and opened the door. The people in black were weak. Perhaps they only seemed that way in comparison to Kino, but they could barely put up a fight before falling one by one. We tossed a pair of flashbangs inside the control room and rushed inside. Several people were lying on the floor.

The control room looked like the bridge of a ship. Through the windows, we could see into the distance. The lights on the machines glowed faintly.

We could see the faint outline of land outside. It was the western continent we were trying to reach.

Master Shizu went off to the side and investigated the machinery. He soon found a blinking monitor. The powerful technology that created this country was still intact.

Perhaps he had found a method of operation, as Master Shizu reached for the monitor. The entire country soon tilted to the side, as if it had come to a sudden stop. We felt the listing even more because we were high up in the tower.

Kino asked anxiously, “Have you figured it out?” Her revolver was held at waist-level, ready to fire at a moment’s notice. Soon, the western continent started growing bigger and bigger. Master Shizu replied that all he had to do was input commands into the monitor.

That was when the control room door opened and the captain emerged. Kino

turned her aim on him. The captain was being supported on either side by people in black, who both seemed to be women. They were all unarmed.

Master Shizu looked at them.

Ti stared.

“What will you do now, Traveler?”

Master Shizu answered honestly, telling them that he would beach the ship so it would not sink. And that he would suggest to the people that they settle on land.

“What will you gain from all this?”

Master Shizu replied, “I will save these people from their horrid living conditions. If things continue this way, they will all die.”

“You intend to become their king?”

The question almost came across as an insult.

But he answered tersely and resolutely, “If necessary.”

Off to the side, I spotted Kino shrug skeptically.

The captain said, “Very well. You are next. Follow him.”

Before we could ask the captain what he meant, he crumpled to the floor.

“What?”

The women supporting him also collapsed, as if they had lost consciousness simultaneously.

“What’s going on here?” Kino wondered, warily approaching the fallen Rulers. They did not even twitch.

As Master Shizu, Ti, and I watched, Kino knelt beside the captain and slowly pulled off his veil.

The people in black were not human.

Where the captain’s head should have been was a wad of cotton shaped to look like a human head. In other words, he was a doll. There was no emotion in his face. It was a piece of flat, dirty cloth.

Kino pulled back the captain's sleeve. The arm was also made of cotton, which was wrapped around a metal core. It was the same for the two people beside him.

"What is all this?" Master Shizu wondered. Kino fell silent. No one could answer us.

Eventually, Kino put the veils and hats back on the Rulers' faces.

The coastline grew clearer and clearer as we neared the shore.

Kino peered into a huge pair of binoculars in the control room and told us that the nearest shore was rocky, but that there was a large beach a little further to the south.

Master Shizu checked the shore as well. The beach was a sandy inlet that was longer than the country was wide. It was the perfect place to beach the country.

Master Shizu focused on the controls, and Kino gave him directions. "I'm counting on you. Please turn the southern loading bay entrance towards the beach. That will make it easier for both of us to get off the ship."

"Right," Master Shizu replied, tapping on the controls. Slowly but surely, the Ship Country rotated and made its way to the beach. Several times we heard the screaming of metal again, but that was no longer a concern.

Kino said, "I'll be making preparations to leave now," and left the control room.

Master Shizu watched it all until the end. The Ship Country approached the beach without a hitch. It automatically braked as it beached itself and stopped, like it had been equipped with the function from the beginning.

It was just about noon. The sun shone through the clouds, bringing light back to the black metallic country that had just been born on the beach.

Master Shizu activated the loudspeaker system, announcing to the people that the country had arrived on land, and that they should go out and see for themselves. He fiddled with the controls and, slowly, the gate on the beach opened.

There were no reactions to tell us that anyone had heard the announcement, but Master Shizu left the control room anyway.

We went down to the first floor and ran across the deck. The gates were nearly fully open. We kept running, and Ti followed us without a word.

We arrived at the residential area, which was swept up in a great commotion. The people spotted Master Shizu and asked him if the announcement was real.

Master Shizu replied, “Go and see for yourselves.”

Everyone crowded their way up to the deck.

We went to Master Shizu’s assigned room and collected his bag, passing the deserted residential area as we headed for the buggy. Master Shizu told Ti that she didn’t have to come with us, but she did anyway.

We passed the lifeless bodies of the Rulers and entered the storage area. The buggy was still parked there, unchanged from the day we arrived at the Ship Country. Master Shizu reconnected the battery and started the engine.

Just as Kino had said, the dredged dock floor was connected directly to the beach.

We could see fresh tire tracks. It was probably from that useless motorrad.

Master Shizu drove the buggy across the beach. As Ti was sitting in the passenger seat, I had to curl up at her feet. I ended up getting kicked each time the buggy shook.

The beach went on into the distance, blinding under the daylight. The tower stood in stark contrast like a pillar between sea and land. We could barely tell if we were inside or outside the walls.

Outside, we spotted people—several hundred, or more, and certainly more than one clan.

They looked out at the beach and the endless plains in the west in utter confusion. It seemed most of them had never seen land before. Some people were touching the sand in surprise, and others tried lying down on it.

Kino stood about 200 meters away, looking in our direction. She was standing at the boundary of the plain with her loaded motorrad. There was a powerful

rifle on her back—perhaps as a precautionary measure. She was a very careful person.

Master Shizu parked the buggy in front of the people. We could see four old people, including the Elder of the clan we lived with, surrounded by young people. They were likely the Elders of each clan.

Naturally, they swarmed Master Shizu the moment they noticed him. Soon the buggy was completely surrounded. We were bombarded with questions from every direction.

Master Shizu stood on his seat and began to explain. Every eye was locked on him. He told the people that he couldn't sit back and allow the tyrannical rule of the People of the Tower to continue. That he had tried to talk with them, and when that failed, he had defeated them.

"Your former rulers have fled the country on another ship. They are no longer here. I entered the control room and set this country here on this continent."

Shock and confusion spread through the crowds like a huge wave. It was understandable—after all, the people had suddenly found themselves free from oppressive rule.

"You no longer have to obey the People of the Tower. You can all live on land now. Use the country for shelter temporarily, until you can transport the technology onto land and build yourselves defensive walls. You can send your ships to sea to catch fish. You can start over on land now."

The people simply stared in awe.

Time passed in silence—first seconds, then minutes. No one spoke. Even the waves were rendered silence by the sheer size of the country. All the adults were in disbelief. We could practically hear the confusion going through their minds.

They might need more time to comprehend, I thought, but a child behind the buggy said to his mother, "I wanna go back."

It was a tiny voice, but one that carried too easily across the silence.

"Let's go back. Please?" the child begged again. His mother knelt beside him

and asked, “Why do you say that, honey? We could live here on land now. Why do you want to go back?” It was like the questions were meant for herself.

Her son’s answer was resolute. “The ground’s not shaking at all. The floor’s soft. And there’s no walls or roofs. I don’t like it.”

It was an alien sentiment to us, but for the people, it was the spark that set off their love for their homeland. The spark bloomed into a flame that lit their hearts, spreading like a wave different from the one Master Shizu had caused.

Their course was set.

“Yeah. Let’s go back,” people began to say. Their voices grew louder and louder, compounded by words like “I don’t like it here”, “It feels weird”, “I prefer the way we’ve always lived”, “We can’t catch fish here”, and “We’re going to get rained on constantly”.

Master Shizu retorted, “There is no future on that ship. It may take years, even decades, but your country is going to sink, along with everyone in it. You have to start over on land.”

The Elder who had welcomed us, however, was defiant. “Preposterous! Our country has always been perfectly fine. It is not going to sink! Don’t try to feed us your lies!”

The Elder’s unfounded argument seemed to hold more water for the people than Master Shizu’s statement of fact. Everyone began to agree.

Then the Elder drove in the final nail in the coffin. “Travelers like you are wanderers with no homes. What would you know about the love we hold for our homeland?”

He wasn’t wrong. Master Shizu was indeed a wanderer, and most people did indeed love their homelands. A place to call home meant everything to some people.

Master Shizu was faced with two choices.

The first would be to ‘persuade’ these people as he had with the People of the Tower. It would be difficult, but not impossible.

The other...

“I see,” Master Shizu said, “Then I have nothing more to say.”

The other choice was to accept that his actions did not lead to his desired conclusion. Master Shizu chose the latter.

I could not see his face, but I knew Master Shizu could not hide his sadness.

But from my perspective, he had given the people the choice to decide their own fate. This was their decision to make. It was not Master Shizu’s business whether they drowned or not.

“Wait,” someone said from the crowd, “if the People of the Tower are gone... shouldn’t our clan get to control the country now?”

There was a murmur of approval from his fellow clansmen, and dissent from the other clans. An argument broke out.

“There’s no use fighting about it here!” one person finally said, “All we have to do is take over the tower first!” He sprinted back towards the country. The men of the other clans took off after him. They pushed and shoved and stampeded into the ship.

The women and children followed soon after, showing no regrets about leaving the land that could have been their new home. People disappeared into the gap in the black wall like a reversing flood. There was nothing left around the buggy but footprints.

I could not see the look on Master Shizu’s face. I did not need to see to know.

Ti said nothing. She had been sitting quietly in the passenger seat the entire time.

Master Shizu watched the people disappear and said to her, “I’ve failed. Go back to your country, Ti.”

Ti said nothing.

I expected her to follow the people back through the gates, so I did not pay her much attention. I simply sat back and watched everyone disappear into the country.

Master Shizu got off the buggy and jumped down to the beach, leaving his footprints in the sand.

Ti followed him onto the beach and followed in his footsteps, coming to a stop next to Master Shizu on the right side of the buggy. I expected she was going to say goodbye and depart.

But Ti did no such thing. She still stood on the beach, a slight distance from the buggy. She stayed beside Master Shizu.

I noticed that the large pocket on her back was bulging. I did not recall it looking that way when we first entered the tower.

“What is it, Ti?” asked Master Shizu, “If you don’t go now, they might end up leaving you behind.”

Ti reached into her pocket and took out a metal cylinder. It resembled a baton used by security guards, but something protruded from the center.

It was not a grenade or a baton, but a sheathed knife. A black blade with a cylindrical handle and sheath. Ti quickly pulled it out and rushed at Master Shizu’s side.

Master Shizu was not easily overtaken by enemies he was facing down, but this was a completely different situation. Ti’s knife drove itself into his flesh.

“Ah!”

Master Shizu managed to get away. The tip of the blade had sliced through his parka, shirt, and skin. Fresh blood sprayed onto the sand.

It looked painful, but I could tell it was not a lethal wound. So I did not call out Master Shizu’s name or anything of the sort. It would not do to distract him.

Master Shizu stepped back towards land, putting about five meters between himself and Ti. She still held the knife in her hands, but Master Shizu did not draw.

They faced each other down silently.

Master Shizu looked at Ti. Her knife was still trained on him. He put his right hand on his side and brought it up to his eye. The blood was fresh on his skin.

He said, “I’m sorry for making you angry, Ti,” sounding completely casual. I wondered if he was misunderstanding something, but said nothing.

There was a dull metallic sound in the distance, and the roar of an engine.

The metallic sound had come from the gap in the wall. The gate was slowly coming down, leaving Ti behind. The people of the country did not seem to care what happened to her.

The sound of the engine was coming from Kino riding up to the buggy on her motorrad. She parked next to the buggy, the rifle still slung over her shoulder.

Master Shizu turned. "Don't get involved. Let me talk this out with her."

The wound was not deep, but it was worrisome to see the bleeding continue. But I did not go to his side.

Master Shizu looked back at Ti. He could see the tall black walls behind her and the closing gates.

"If you don't go now," he said, "You won't be able to get back in, Ti."

Ti did not answer. She did not even turn her head.

We could not tell what she was thinking.

"So that's Tifana? I get it now!" someone exclaimed. The scrapheap of a motorrad in Kino's possession. In any other situation I would have quipped, 'Keep your mouth shut. Oh, but motorrads don't have mouths anyway', but now was not the time.

How did he know Ti's name? The motorrad must have been locked in a storage area for the trip. Not even Kino should have known about Ti.

Master Shizu was also surprised. He turned to listen.

"Let me explain," said the motorrad. It seemed we wouldn't have to ask for an explanation. "I was getting really bored sitting alone in the storehouse, so I talked to the guys in black when they came over to patrol the area. They were machines too, so they told me a lot of things. About who they were, and who that girl was."

"What did they say?" Kino asked, mildly surprised. I wasn't pleased that the motorrad was now at the center of attention, but he was the only one with the answers now.

“I promised them I wouldn’t tell Kino until we were out of the country,” he said, “I was going to talk about it to pass the time on the way to the next country, but I guess there’s no harm in telling you now. The people in black are gone now, anyway.”

I wished the heap of junk would get to the point already.

“‘Tifana’ was the name of a drifting ship that arrived at an abandoned floating country.”

“Really?” Kino exclaimed.

“Yep. That was about six hundred years ago,” the motorrad said lackadaisically, “The Tifana was some sort of a pilgrimage or migration vessel, and the only people inside were hundreds of kids less than three years old. Anyone older than that had apparently died of some plague.”

The gates were slowly closing.

The motorrad went on, “The Tifana had an autopilot system with a certain degree of artificial intelligence. But since all the adults were dead, there was no one around to give it orders. The machine didn’t know what to do, so it just kept the ship wandering around the sea, keeping the kids alive.”

“So the people now are the descendants of those children,” Master Shizu surmised.

“Yeah. And the autopilot system was the people in black.”

“What do you mean, Hermes?”

“The autopilot decided to have the children live in that country. They had a better chance of surviving there than on the Tifana. Then it moved its main system into the tower. There was still energy left in the power supply, and other things to salvage. You know how the people in black were all dolls? They said that they made it that way because the children needed human-shaped caretakers. The autopilot raised the kids until they were mature enough to work for themselves. But there was a problem.”

“There was no one to guide and lead them,” said Master Shizu, eyes locked ahead. Even if the children had grown, they were still children. They would live

lawlessly, get into disputes, and society would eventually fall into chaos.

“That’s a prince for you,” the motorrad chirped. “So the autopilot thought about it, and decided to create a powerful entity to keep the order. That was the People of the Tower. One day, it created the people in black and claimed that they were the people who had been living on the ship since ancient times. There wasn’t any big reason behind the black clothes. Anyway, the Rulers showed the kids how to get food, fix up old machinery for trading with countries on land, and barter for things they needed to live. The children survived and grew into adults. There wasn’t much else on the ship to do, and soon enough there was a population explosion. The people who split off in disputes created their own clans, but there hasn’t been any bloodshed between them until now. That’s all for the history of the Ship Country.”

The morbidly innocent history lesson came to a close. Kino asked the obvious question: “Why didn’t the people in black beach the country earlier?”

The motorrad replied, “I wondered about that too. They said they considered settling the people on land, but they couldn’t do that without revealing their own identity. There wasn’t any guarantee than other countries would help people who were under the rule of something inhuman. And they didn’t believe the people would be able to survive in such an unfamiliar environment, so they gave up on that idea.”

“So that’s what they meant when they told me I was next,” Master Shizu muttered. The captain had not meant it as a curse or insult. He was leaving the future of the country in Master Shizu’s hands.

Ti still stood there, completely frozen, knife clutched in her hands. The gates were half-closed.

“Tell me about Ti,” Master Shizu said, “How do you know her name?” We had to hurry. There wasn’t much time left until the gates shut completely.

“All right. She’s not actually from this country.”

Ti’s knife was still pointed at Master Shizu. But she was almost imperceptibly trembling.

“That girl’s parents were a traveler couple who boarded the Ship Country for

the crossing.”

Kino said, “I see. That’s why she looks so different from everyone else.” Ti was indeed the only young person there with white hair.

“Did her parents pass away?” asked Master Shizu.

“No,” the motorrad said, “They abandoned her.”

If the scrapheap of a motorrad was not lying (which he had no reason to), Ti had been left behind.

Her parents were a pair of wanderers who visited many countries. It was not uncommon for married couples to be traveling together. This couple had come to the Ship Country thirteen years ago for the crossing, initially planning to disembark as soon as they had reached land. But something about the country caught their interest, and they ended up staying for over a year.

That was when Ti was born. Apparently the couple was very happy at first. The people in black also did everything they could to support the family. Incidentally, Ti had a different name at the time.

But the couple slowly grew tired of life in that country and contemplated leaving. But one thing nagged at their thoughts.

How were they supposed to travel with a baby?

It would indeed be very difficult to travel with a baby—but not entirely impossible.

But the couple made their decision and left the country and their daughter behind. They left with a doll dressed up like a baby to fool the people when they departed.

It was only later that the people in black found Ti crying alone in the storehouse. There was nothing they could do by then. The travelers had already made it to land, enjoying their lives as wanderers.

After some deliberation, the people in black—the autopilot—decided to raise Ti themselves. They could not trust the people with her, as the people placed great emphasis on blood relations.

So they gave her a new name: Tifana. The name of the ship that started it all.

Ti was taught many things as she grew up. They told her from the beginning that her parents had abandoned her, and that the people in black were not human.

She was raised almost like the princess of the country. The food they acquired from the trades mainly went to keeping Ti healthy. The machine knew that the common people's diet was extremely dangerous.

Ti was the only person who was allowed to wander the country as she pleased. The people feared her because she could appear anywhere at any time, and even treated her like a demon or an omen of misfortune. Which was not completely inaccurate, as Ti did indeed spy on the people for the machines. I finally understood how Ti knew the country so extensively.

The people in black were the ones who had sent Ti to Master Shizu. That was because no traveler had chosen to stay with the people before, which was baffling to the machine. So it had sent Ti to watch us closely.

"Basically, she was spying on you," the motorrad said. But I understood something else.

The people in black had decided that, if Ti took a liking to Master Shizu, she could go along with him if she wanted to.

That was what the captain had said in his final moments. 'Follow him.' He was talking to Ti, telling their princess to follow Master Shizu—the next king—and live on.

The people in black were gone. There was no place for Ti in that country. She would likely die a terrible death if she did not stay with Master Shizu.

Master Shizu had meant well, but telling her to go back must have sounded like a death sentence to Ti.

I was about to say all this, but was interrupted by a terrible noise. Something had gotten caught in the gate and it refused to close. We could hear the sound of breaking metal.

And then—

"I don't have anywhere to go back to!"

It took me a moment to register that the clear, high-pitched voice belonged to Ti. Master Shizu was shocked as well. And then, he was once again taken by surprise.

He looked down at Ti, gaze fixed on her face.

Then he looked down at his own stomach.

Even I was stunned into silence. Kino tensed. I heard the sound of feet pattering against the sand.

“Uh-oh,” said the motorrad.

A knife stuck out of Master Shizu’s stomach. It had buried itself quite deep.

His parka had been skewered along with him, now stuck flat against Master Shizu’s stomach. Blood dripped down onto his jeans.

A metallic cylinder was attached to the knife. Ti was still at a distance, hands firmly on the hilt.

The mystery was quickly solved. A thick spring stuck out of the hilt in Ti’s hands. The knife must have been equipped with a spring-loaded launch mechanism. Pressing the protrusion would shoot the blade.

“Oh...Ti...”

Coughing up blood, Master Shizu slumped to the ground. His knees hit the sand. His unfocused eyes saw Ti, then the sky, and finally, the ground. Master Shizu fell onto the beach with his back to me.

In that short span of time, Ti dropped the hilt and took out an identical weapon from her pocket, still as stoic as ever.

Before I could even think, Kino asked, “Which one?” Her large-caliber revolver was in her hand and ready to fire. “That wound looks deep.”

I did not need her to point that out. Master Shizu would die if he wasn’t treated immediately, or blood loss or otherwise.

If I chose to save Master Shizu, a .44 caliber round would blow away half of Ti’s head. If I did not make a choice, Master Shizu would bleed to death on the beach.

Kino had no obligation to save either Master Shizu or Ti. Killing either or both would not affect her in any way. All she had to do was leave me here with a buggy I couldn't drive and continue her journey with her motorrad.

But she had gone out of her way to ask, meaning that she wanted me to give me a choice.

The answer was laughably simple. I took a deep breath—

“Neither!”

That was not my answer.

“Neither, Kino!”

Master Shizu. Kino was taken aback.

Slowly pushing himself off the sand, Master Shizu tried to get up. His knees and hands were on the ground, and blood continued to spill from his stomach. The knife was still lodged inside.

“Neither,” he repeated. “So don't get involved.” Master Shizu looked up and gave me and Kino a slight smile. His mouth was stained red.

“Ti,” Master Shizu said, turning.

Ti flinched, still holding the second knife. I had not seen her expression falter since she first ate the rations.

Her eyes were wide, and her mouth was open, breathing silently. The face of a person facing unimaginable terror. The tip of her knife was trembling.

“Don't be scared, Ti. I'm sorry,” Master Shizu said, stumbling to his feet. Walking. Step by step, he approached Ti.

Then there was a heavy thud, like the ringing of a bell. The gate closed firmly shut.

Master Shizu took another step forward. “I understand now, Ti. I'm sorry,” he said, “I didn't know, but I still must have hurt you so much when I told you to go back.”

He coughed. Blood gushed from his mouth, splattering onto the sand.

But he continued to walk towards the knife like the living dead.

“You can’t go back now...there’s nothing we can do about that now...and it’s all my fault. But...”

Ti looked up at him silently. Master Shizu was right in front of her. She didn’t even need the spring contraption now—all she had to do was push her arms forward and the knife would pierce him.

“But...I won’t leave you behind... Come with me... Let’s live on...and rely on each other...”

No one but Ti could see the look on his face now.

The little girl looked straight into the eyes of the man before her.

And she once again broke her silence.

“Th...thank you...”

“There’s no need. But you’re welcome,” Master Shizu said cheerfully, and slowly fell to his knees. He took Ti and the knife in his embrace.

Ti reached for Master Shizu. The knife fell from her hands and quietly pierced the sand. Two stick-thin arms cradled Master Shizu’s head.

With eyes closed, Ti’s small face buried itself next to Master Shizu’s. A head of black and ahead of white, placed next to each other. The ground shook. We heard the sound of engines.

The black walls behind them were slowly getting lower and lower. The Ship Country had begun departing, leaving Ti behind. The walls grew distant with unusual speed.

As Ti pressed her face to his, Master Shizu said, “Looks like it’s goodbye to that country...for both you and me...”

Ti nodded, still locked in embrace.

“But now we...”

Ti looked up at the western skies and quietly waited for him to continue.

“Now...we can...”

His voice trailed off.

“Ah...!”

Ti gave a soft scream.

Without a sound, Master Shizu fell backwards. Ti fell forward with him, unable to support his weight. Master Shizu’s face was deathly pale, striking a stark contrast to the blood on his lips. His breathing was extremely shallow. He was still alive, but just barely.

“No!” Ti screamed. “No! You can’t leave me! Please don’t leave me here! Please!”

Her face remained unchanged, but Ti kept shaking her head in denial. Again and again she pleaded, but Master Shizu did not respond.



Then, without warning, she stopped and looked down at Master Shizu.

In the next moment, she reached for his right side. I could not tell what she was thinking.

“This isn’t good,” Kino said. When Ti raised her hand again, she was gripping a round metal object.

A grenade.

Once it exploded, it would half-destroy both Ti and Master Shizu. She must have taken it from his pocket.

“They’re going to die together,” the motorrad remarked. There was a click. Kino took aim and cocked her revolver.

If she shot Ti in the head, the grenade would not go off. There would simply be one little corpse lying beside Master Shizu. Ti’s left hand reached for the pin.

Kino held her breath, ready to fire. And she exhaled—

“No!” Master Shizu cried.

Who was he speaking to? Ti, or Kino?

Ti pulled the pin. The lever popped out of the handle.

They had four seconds.

Kino pulled the trigger.

A long and terrifying gunshot resounded across the beach.

The bullet flew at the speed of sound. It took less than a tenth of a second.

Flying straight at Ti, it hit its mark—the base of the grenade in her right hand.

Before Ti could even react, the grenade was knocked out of her hand. It flew towards the deserted waterside.

The grenade exploded, leaving a small pit in the sand.

The massive Ship Country was disappearing into the distance.

A wave approached the beach. It washed over the little hole in the sand. When it withdrew, the hole had already gone.